

Life, Love, and a Polar Bear Tattoo

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Monday, August 1st

I studied Ian, the husband I'd vowed to love, the man I could barely talk to any more. He held my gaze, his jaw set and his eyes distant as if he'd retreated somewhere inside, somewhere I couldn't follow, somewhere safe from me. The urge to knock his luggage aside and throw myself into his arms flooded me, but I resisted. We weren't like that any more.

"Well, I should get in there," he said. "The security check will take ages."

I nodded. "You're sure you have everything?"

"I hope so." He paused as if considering what he had to bring, then said, "I'll miss you, Candice."

"I... I'll miss you too," I said, tears rising at the realization that we were both embarrassed to admit to even this much emotion. How had we lost each other so completely?

"Enjoy having time to yourself."

As I intended to use at least part of Ian's four-week absence to decide whether our marriage was salvageable, I didn't expect much enjoyment. "I'll try," I said, then added, to lighten the mood, "but Ninja probably won't let me."

"You tell him who's boss," he said, giving me a wry smile.

"He already knows he is," I said, attempting to return his smile. And failing.

"Ian..." I stared at him, unable to find the words to say how sorry I was for how *wrong* our lives together had become, for the gap between us that I couldn't see how to bridge.

He pulled me as close as he could over the suitcases, his hand smoothing over the back of my head and down the length of my hair. Ignoring the people bustling around us, knowing his luggage wouldn't be stolen from between us, I closed my eyes and breathed in Ian's scent of fabric softener and lumber. Only the wife of a carpenter would find the smell of wood sexy. Ian's arms around me had always been safety, security, but since the car accident there'd been no safety to be found.

Ian gave me one last squeeze, then pulled back to look into my eyes. "I love you, you know."

We hadn't said that for a while. "I love you too." And I did. I knew I did. I just didn't *feel* it any more.

He dropped his head and said, without looking at me, "I wish..." then shrugged.

He could have been wishing for anything, but I knew what he meant. I'd been thinking about it all morning, and apparently he had as well. "Me too," I said, forcing the words out past the sudden lump in my throat. He hadn't mentioned his parents for months. "But they were thrilled you took on the project and they'd be so happy for you today. You're doing a great thing."

He stood still for a moment then bent and gathered the pull straps of his suitcases into one hand. "Email me tonight and I'll write back as soon as I get settled. Drive carefully, okay?"

Before Christmas Eve, that had been just a casual comment, a throw-away. After his parents' deaths, it meant a lot more. "I will. I promise."

He put his hand on my cheek and leaned in to kiss me. His mouth on mine was as warm and sweet as ever, but the sense that he was only kissing me because he knew he should made me uncomfortably relieved when he pulled away.

After a few steps toward the airport entrance he turned back and said, "Check the glove box."

"Why?"

"Sometimes things crawl in there and hide."

I blinked, confused. "In the car?"

"Might want to be where it's air conditioned," he said. "To avoid the heat. Some things don't like the heat."

"Ah," I said, and we smiled at each other, almost shyly, then he dragged his suitcases behind him into the airport. He didn't look back.

Once he was out of sight, I popped open the car's glove box, picked up the plastic bag that tumbled out, and peered inside to see a small white face peering back at me.

I blinked back tears as I pulled the bear from the bag. Ian liked to tease me about my polar bear obsession, but he knew how attached I was to them. This one was adorable, soft and plushy with its arms open as if waiting for a hug. I couldn't quite bring myself to hug it in public, but I settled it into the passenger seat, fastening its seatbelt tightly, to keep me company as I drove to work.

I did up my own seatbelt as well, making sure it didn't catch on my lacy cardigan, the first thing I'd ever crocheted. Ian had been so impressed I'd been able to handle the intricate stitches and he liked me in blue, so I'd worn it today to say goodbye. Maybe I'd wear it again on his return.

Before I joined the steady flow of Toronto airport traffic, I shot a quick look in the opposite direction as well, making sure none of the other drivers were doing something unexpected. Ian always did this extra little check while driving, and it had become a habit for me too, ingrained by his constant reminders.

My cell phone rang after I'd been on the move a minute or two, and I scrambled to find it in my purse while still keeping my eyes on the road. Could something have happened to Ian? He'd verified at least ten times that he had all the documentation he needed, but--

I glanced at the phone's screen and relief swept me. "Hi, Lou."

"If Ian's not gone yet, I can call back."

"No, I'm just leaving the airport."

"Okay. We have a new client you need to meet."

"I met him on Friday," I said, surprised Lou didn't remember.

"Not that one. The *new* new client."

"Another one? I thought we were booked solid."

"I know we are, *you* know we are, but Richard doesn't seem to be able to remember."

"Ah." There was nothing more to be said. Richard owned Sapphire Interior Design and was constantly on the hunt for new clients. He worked only for the most affluent and influential clients, Lou took care of the firm's restaurant design work, and I handled whatever Lou assigned to me.

"Exactly. He'll be here at eleven, so if you can make it back by then it'd be great."

I glanced at the car's clock. Almost ten. "Should be fine. Close to it, anyhow."

"Come right to my office when you get here, okay?"

"Will do." I hung up, and gave such a huge sigh that I made myself a little light-headed. I'd been hoping for a quiet day with no surprises, a day where I could sit at my desk and do easy tasks and not have to be cheerful and enthusiastic for some new client.

The drive to the office, unfortunately, bore no surprises: no matter what time I took the highway it was always insanely busy and today was no exception. My shoulders grew tight and painful as I drove, and by the time I reached the office's parking lot I'd developed a headache. A perfect addition to the day.

When I pushed through the heavy mahogany double doors, the office was empty.

Coffee break time. I walked past the assistant designers desks, my steps echoing on the polished white marble, then caught a glimpse of myself in the mirrored wall surrounding Richard's office.

I'd left my hair down because Ian liked it loose, it was far too out of control for work. Or for any time, really. Its weight pulled it straight to just past my chin, where it exploded into waves that reached the middle of my back. Despite its lack of cooperation, I'd always thought long hair was prettier than short, so I kept it in all its uneven dull brown 'glory'.

My mascara was still in place, but then I hadn't cried when Ian left. I would have, a year ago. I hadn't let myself cry for a long time, too afraid I might not be able to stop. The lip gloss I'd put on in the morning was gone, though, so I gave myself another quick slick, grabbing a painkiller from my purse at the same time. I took the pill dry, pulled a big gold-colored clip from my desk drawer and twisted my hair up, then tucked my purse under my desk and knocked on Lou's door.

"Come in."

I did, and stopped in the doorway like I'd run into a glass wall. I felt as stunned as if I had. It couldn't be. It *couldn't* be him.

But it was.

Lou waved me to the other visitor chair and I sat down, struggling to keep my face calm. Taking his own seat behind his mahogany desk, Lou said, "Kegan, this is my assistant Candice Warburton. Candice, this is Kegan Underwood, our newest client."

Kegan turned sharply toward me when Lou said 'Warburton', but he just smiled and said, "Nice to see you again," holding his hand out to me. Our eyes met as we shook hands, and a sparkly shock rippled through me. I took back my hand as quickly as I could.

Lou's eyes flicked from Kegan to me and back again. "You know each other, I take it?"

I swallowed hard. "It's been a few years, but yes."

Ten, to be exact. Ten years since he'd ripped my heart out and left me in pieces. And, damn, those years had been good to him. He looked older, of course, but it suited him. His face, stronger and more mature than I remembered, was the face of a man now, and that suited him. His dark hair, in a sleek business-like cut instead of the tousled style he'd worn in university, had just a touch of silver at the temples, and the hint of maturity and strength suited him. His eyes, though, those glorious blue eyes were the same. They'd always suited him.

My hair was a lot longer, and I'd put on a few pounds since I'd seen him last. I hadn't worn makeup at all back then. Did he think I looked good? I forced the thought out of my mind. His opinion meant nothing to me.

Kegan smiled. "Small world, isn't it?" Those blue eyes, just as magnetic as I remembered, seemed to be searching my soul. Kegan. Here. At the worst possible time. I said nothing, turning away from him.

Lou, rifling through a folder stuffed with papers, said, "Yup. Small. Look, with your deadline, we need to get a lot done today. You can stay for a while, Kegan?"

He nodded, and I said, "What is the deadline?"

My voice sounded strange and tight, even to myself, and Lou looked at me. "Are you okay, Candice?"

"I'm fine," I said, dragging myself together. If Kegan realized how he was affecting me, he'd gain a victory I didn't want him to have. "It's just been a rough weekend." I could have strangled myself.

Lou smiled at me. "I'm sure it has." Turning to Kegan, he said, despite my begging him mentally not to, "Candice's husband has just left for a one-month stay in Bangladesh, volunteering with a charity. They'll be building at least one house and a one-room school, right, Candice?"

I fixed my eyes on Lou's face so I wouldn't have to see Kegan's. "Yes. That's the plan, anyhow."

"That's wonderful," Kegan said. "Very noble."

He sounded sincere, but I still wouldn't be discussing Ian with Kegan. "Yes, I'm

very proud of him. Back to work, though. The deadline?"

"September fifteenth," Kegan said.

Shocked, I turned to him without meaning to. "Six weeks?" Lou and I usually spent at least four months getting a new restaurant planned and ready to open. I worked with the clients at the beginning to help them define their vision, and Lou created the designs to make it happen.

"That's right," Lou said, throwing a 'no scaring the client' look in my direction. "Kegan knows it's a rush job, but I've assured him we can handle it." He turned his attention back to his papers, and I forced myself to look at Kegan. If I was going to make it through this, I had to get used to the sight of him.

Our eyes met, and I was twenty-one again, head over heels in love for the first time, hearing him tell me why I wasn't good enough for him, then somehow gathering the strength to walk away and leave him. Was he thinking the same thing? Probably not.

Kegan shot me a wink, the same sexy little wink that had always made me blush and giggle. My cheeks burned once again, but this time it was from a sudden fury. *Nice try, but it's not going to work.* I was not going to be won over.

Lou looked up and began speaking about the schedule, and I focused on him like a starving woman on a nice juicy steak. "Candice, I've already told Kegan I won't be fully available this week. You're his contact until at least Thursday. Anything he wants, you'll make sure he gets."

Anything?

"I knew you shouldn't have taken that job," Larissa said.

I stared at her. "Then why didn't you say something at the time?"

"I did! I said if Kegan ever got off his ass and started his restaurant, you might have to work with him."

"But we never thought it would happen. And Ian's boss was nice enough to talk to Lou about me. I'd have offended him if I hadn't taken the job."

Larissa toyed with the stem of her martini glass. "But once Ian wasn't working for him any more, why didn't you..."

My rum and coke went down the wrong way and I started coughing, trying to do it as quietly as I could to not annoy the other diners. When I was able to speak again, I said, "Ian only left that job a few months ago. I should have quit working for Lou, after nearly three years, because Kegan *might* show up one day?"

Before she could answer, I jumped in again. "And I can't do anything now anyhow. Kegan would know it was because of him. Why didn't you say something when Ian quit his job?"

"I don't tell you everything I think, you know," Larissa said with a hint of the eight-year-old girl she'd been when we'd met and become instant best friends. I responded in kind.

"You don't? But you never stop talking. When do you have time to think anything else?"

Larissa dropped her hands to the side of her chair and leaned forward as if about to get up. "Don't make me come over there."

"Don't make me laugh." I balled my hands into fists and shook them at her.

Our pretend fight was derailed by the arrival of the waitress with our food. She was new, and having a lot of trouble. She gave my plate to Larissa, knocking over a drink in the process, and had to go back three times to get the salad dressing and butter.

"Who only brings one pat of butter to two people?" Larissa said after the waitress was finally done.

"Beats me. Kegan won't stand for it."

Larissa closed her eyes as though I'd physically hurt her. "Please *please* don't let him get to you."

"Just because he talked about how he expects his staff to behave doesn't mean--"

"Candice. Shut up. You know what he's like. You have to be careful."

Yes, I did. On both counts. I sighed. "If I could get out of it, I would. But Lou didn't give me much choice."

"If you stay professional, and don't let him try anything, it should be okay." She didn't sound convinced.

"He's not going to try anything. Please. If he wanted me, he could have kept me. No, I don't think that's in the cards." I emphasized the last word, and focused my eyes on her purse on the extra chair between us.

Her face lit up. "Of course, why didn't I think of that?" After a few seconds of rummaging, she pulled out a tiny cardboard box.

She'd been skeptical about tarot cards when her older sister first showed her how to read them. Rachel had told Larissa she would meet a beautiful blond man and fall in love, but it wouldn't last forever. Three weeks later, Larissa fell hard for a stunning Nordic boy in town for a week on business. They'd spent nearly the entire time in the bedroom, and then Hans or Karl or whatever-his-name-was returned to Norway (Denmark? Sweden?) never to be heard from again.

Since that day, Larissa had been the queen of the tarot cards. She'd also predicted that I would find true love. Beaten down by Kegan and a few too many dead-end relationships after him, I'd actually laughed in her face. She'd been right, though: a month later I'd met Ian. She read the cards so often for me now that she kept a set at my house, and she always had the travel pack I'd given her in her purse.

Larissa removed the cards from their little box and shuffled them carefully. They were so small that one wrong move would send them everywhere. It had happened before, but never in a restaurant. I was half-hoping she'd scatter them far and wide, but she maintained her control. When she'd shuffled them a few times, she held them out to me. "Think about what you need to know and cut the deck."

Am I going to survive working with Kegan? I lifted the pile of cards from her hand, divided it into two stacks, and put the bottom stack onto the top one. I thought my question one more time and returned the cards.

"I just read about this one online," Larissa said, cradling the cards in her palm.

"You pick out one card, and it answers the question all by itself."

She spread the cards into a fan and waited. I looked at the cards, willing myself to choose a good one. Something with sweetness and light. Something about getting a job done and then never being heard from again. I picked a card. Larissa turned it over.

"Death."

"I've never had that one before. Kegan's going to kill me? Maybe he'll make me an entrée. Roast Candice." I giggled.

Larissa wasn't laughing. "The card doesn't mean physical death. It means huge changes."

"Like what?" I said, unnerved by her solemn face.

"The end of an era, a totally new start, the loss of a long-term friendship or relationship..." She trailed off, and our eyes met.

"I won't let it happen," I said. I meant it, but I couldn't help thinking of how I'd reacted to his handshake. I'd have to make sure he didn't get the chance to touch me again.

"Quit."

I stared at her. "Pardon?"

"Quit work. Go in tomorrow and quit." Her voice was full of passion. Was my card really that bad?

"I can't do that. Lou needs me. And we need the money. Especially if... if I end up needing treatment."

She grimaced. "Yeah. You won't, but yeah." We ate in uncomfortable silence for a few bites before she said, "And you didn't tell Ian about having the repeat test?"

I shook my head.

She sighed. "It's nothing, I'm sure, but if it *does* come back bad, then what? You call him and tell him while he's halfway round the world?"

"No, I wait until he gets home and tell him."

"Don't you think he deserved to know? You *are* his wife. I'm sure he'd have been there for you."

But then he might have insisted on cancelling his trip, and he needed to go. Partly for the good work he'd be doing, but mostly for him. I hadn't been able to do anything to help him after his parents died; maybe time alone would do something good for him. "He's got enough to worry about. And it's probably nothing anyhow."

Larissa obviously had more to say, but she kept it to herself, and we worked away at our food without speaking. At last, though, she put down her fork with a clatter. "Okay, I wasn't going to ask, but I can't stop myself. How does he look? Has he changed? What did you talk about?"

Kegan, for once, was the lesser of two conversational evils, and I jumped at the chance to distract Larissa from the question of whether I should have told Ian about my abnormal Pap test before he left. "We didn't talk about anything but the restaurant, and he really only talked to Lou about that while I took notes. He left after an hour, but I have to see him tomorrow afternoon."

She frowned. "Just you?"

I pulled my mouth to one side. "Probably. Lou's so busy."

"There's nobody else who can do it?"

I shook my head. "Lou's the restaurant designer. Unless he hires a second assistant, which Richard would never allow because it'd cut into his profits, I'm it."

Larissa drained her martini glass. Setting it back down on the table, she said, "Well, it's not like you'd ever be stupid enough to fall for him again, so I guess it's okay. And how'd he look?"

I shook my head slowly and sighed. "I thought he was gorgeous before. Now he

looks gorgeous *and* grown up."

"Just like you."

I gave a grunt of a laugh. "No, since I'm neither of those things."

"Says you. Ian doesn't agree."

True. I often suggested he needed glasses, but he persisted in saying he thought I was beautiful. I wanted to believe him, but Kegan's--

"You're thinking about what that jerk said, aren't you?"

"How do you *do* that? You always know."

"You go sort of vacant and dreamy looking. So were you?"

"Kind of. Did you just call me vacant?"

"Get over it. If Ian thinks you're beautiful, what does it matter whether Kegan said..." She trailed off.

"Said I wasn't?"

"He didn't come right out and say it."

"Might as well have."

Larissa sighed. "'I've had a smart girl and now I want a beautiful one', and he ends a three-year relationship. If I see him, I'll shove an eyeliner sideways up his--"

"Larissa!"

"I wouldn't waste a good one. They're expensive. I'll buy some cheap crappy one that I'd never use at work."

"Oh yeah, that's much better."

We laughed and I changed the subject, asking after her boyfriend Greg. She chattered on about him, fiddling with the opal ring he'd given her for their one-

year anniversary a few months ago, which she never took off, and I listened and gave the appropriate responses. The shadow of Kegan seemed to hang in the air over our table, though, and for once I was glad to leave.

Just before she headed to the subway station, Larissa said, "Call me whenever you want."

"I know, I do--"

"No, I mean *any* time. If you need me, if he's doing anything..."

Anger spilled through me. I wasn't completely incompetent. I could handle a few days of working with Kegan. I forced myself to relax; Larissa only wanted to help.

"I will. Thanks."

She gave me a sad smile and set off. I walked to my car, thinking through the events of the day. Kegan had been back in my life barely a day, and the Death card was already making its presence known.

As I unlocked the front door, juggling my purse, work bag, and new polar bear, I could hear Ninja howling for his dinner. I managed to get inside without stepping on him, and put my bags and shoes in the hall closet. The bear found a home on the coffee table in the living room. It would eventually join the rest of my bears, clustered mostly in our bedroom and the computer room, but for now, it was a comfort and I wanted it front and center.

I gave Ninja a scoop of his insanely expensive cat food, sat down on the couch, and picked up the bear. I stroked its soft fur and wished I had Ian there with me instead of the bear. We'd never been apart this long before, and I was just starting to realize how weird it would be without him.

I hadn't thought about Kegan much since Ian and I had been married. The first year of our marriage had been so blissful that there'd been no room in my mind for anyone but Ian, and we'd had so much pain in our lives since Ian's parents had been killed that we'd barely had room for each other. Pain, and guilt, at least on my part. I didn't know if he felt guilty, but then, he had no reason to. And now, with my test result...

I was going to be all right. Lots of women got one bad test result and it didn't mean anything, didn't mean cancer. But I was still terrified. I felt so alone. Only Larissa knew, and suddenly I did wish I'd told Ian. I clung to the bear, but it didn't help.

After a minute or so, I wiped away the few tears I'd let fall and pulled myself together. I needed sleep, but first I had to email Ian. Since there were a lot of people at the camp sharing one computer, he wouldn't be able to get online very often, so we'd agreed to only email once a day.

Writing an email describing this particular day was a tough task. I would only see Kegan a few times before Lou took over the project, and he wasn't interested in me anyhow. There didn't seem to be much point in possibly upsetting Ian over something so trivial. I tried doing it both ways, but neither seemed right, so I decided not to tell him.

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacatocks@hotmail.com

Subject: Greetings

Hey! I hope everything is going well and you get settled in nicely. I have to figure out how to get the weather reports so I'll know what it's like out there.

Not much going on here. I had dinner with Larissa. We have a new client at work. It's a rush job, so at least I'll be busy while you're gone.

Ninja says, "Meow." Translate as you see fit. I assume it means, "Where's Daddy? Who do I sit on for hours while we watch football?" Or it might have had something to do with food. You know how he is.

Write back when you get a chance.

Candice

I re-read the email. It all seemed fine until I got to the end. We never put 'love' or 'hugs and kisses' or anything like that in our emails, but with him so far away, I felt like I should. Not 'hugs and kisses', Ian would laugh himself sick, but...

I went back and put 'love' just above my name, then stared at it. It couldn't hurt.

Email sent, I made myself a cup of tea and relaxed on the couch for a while working on my current crochet project, a lacy skirt in various shades of rich blue, and watching television, keeping my mind safely occupied with inconsequential. I went to bed earlier than usual, feeling I needed my rest. Tomorrow promised to be... interesting.

Tuesday, August 2nd

I am standing on an ice floe. I turn my head from side to side, but see nothing but water studded with chunks of vibrantly blue glacial ice. I look back over my shoulder, but there is nobody there. I stand alone, proud and majestic, as the sky darkens to black.

I raise my head and gaze at a beautiful bright star in the velvet sky. After a long moment, I turn and pad away in search of food, stopping only when a strangely mournful bell begins to ring.

And ring. And ring. My eyes still closed, I scrabbled around on the bedside table and eventually laid my hand on the cordless phone.

I said something that was meant to be hello.

"Are you about to leave?"

"No, I'm a polar bear," I mumbled, sliding back into sleep, back into the dream I had every few days.

"Candice, what on earth are you talking about?"

I forced my eyes open and sat up. "Pardon?"

"Very funny, dear. Now listen, I know you have to leave in a minute so I'll keep this short."

My alarm clock was blinking 12:00. There must have been a power failure overnight. "Mom," I said, interrupting whatever she was on about, "what time is it?"

"It's nearly eight thirty. Don't tell me you're just getting up."

All right. "No, of course not. I do have to get going, though. What were you saying?" I rifled through my closet, organized by color, and found a skirt and a short-sleeved sweater, then began to dress while pinching the phone between my ear and shoulder.

"I just wanted to make sure you were still coming to dinner this Sunday."

"Still?"

She gave a sigh. "You remember, Candice. I invited you last week."

She hadn't. "Oh, right. Sure, I can still come."

"Your father will be so pleased. Well, see you then."

And she was gone, leaving me with yet another thing to worry about. I loved her but I wasn't always sure I liked my mother much. And she certainly didn't like Ian. Maybe things would go better since he wasn't here. Maybe.

No time to obsess, though. I had to get to the office. Lou didn't like me to show up later than nine, and as my commute was nearly twenty minutes, I had to get a move on. In less than five minutes, I threw my hair back into a french twist, slapped on a little makeup, and put on my favorite silver earrings. Then I grabbed a granola bar in the kitchen, tossed some food in Ninja's direction, and speed-walked down the road to the subway station.

Crammed into the subway car with the other commuters, like so many well-dressed sardines in a tin, I wondered for the millionth time whether I'd done the right thing not telling my mother about my test result. If it did turn out to be cancer, she'd be furious that she hadn't known right from the start.

The doctor hadn't wanted to commit herself one way or the other. "Test results like this can be false positives, Candice, but there's no guarantee. If it *is* cervical cancer, the faster we treat it the better."

So I'd put my feet back in the stirrups, and she'd done another test and promised to phone me when she had the results. "I expect them by August twelfth, so if you don't hear from me by the fifteenth give me a call."

I swung between thinking it was no big deal and utter certainty that my death was imminent. When I'd told Larissa, she'd been comforting, in her own way. "Only the good die young. You and I'll be here forever."

I hadn't even considered telling anyone at work. If it was nothing, I didn't want to have my coworkers contemplating my cervix, and if it *wasn't* nothing, there'd be time later to tell if I needed to. I was sure I'd made the right decision there.

Not telling Ian I wasn't quite so sure about.

I arrived at the office about fifteen seconds before nine. A little sweaty and out of breath, but at least I was there and on time. I pushed open the office door, quite proud of myself. And I had a few hours before I'd have to face--

"Good morning," Kegan said. He was sitting beside Richard's cute young assistant Allyson, who looked like Christmas had come early.

I stared at him. Why was he here? We'd agreed on the afternoon, at his restaurant. His presence in my office felt all wrong, intimidating and uncomfortable, even though he had every right to be there.

"I'm fine, thanks, and you?" Kegan said, raising an eyebrow, a smile playing over his mouth.

"Mr. Underwood is here to see you, Candice," Allyson said, giving me an incredulous look.

"Didn't I tell you to call me Kegan?" He and Allyson locked eyes, and she said, "I'm sorry, *Kegan*," pulling her long perfectly straight blonde hair over her shoulder and flashing him a bright smile.

"That's better," he said, smiling back at her. Turning to me, he said, "Take your time, go and check your email or whatever you need to do. I need to talk to Richard for a second once he's off the phone, so I'll just sit here and bug Allyson until then."

"You're a client, not a bug," she said, sounding more sincere than I'd ever heard her. "I'm happy to take care of you."

No doubt. "Thanks," I muttered, going to my desk and trying to pull myself

together. I started up my computer and fought the urge to run to the bathroom and find out just how bad I looked.

Kegan, naturally, looked fantastic. His deep blue dress shirt matched his eyes, his pale grey tie was the perfect accent, and his hair was sleek without being overdone. Even in university he'd always been just that fraction better groomed than everyone else, clean-shaven every morning with just a hint of stubble by the evening, and never without a touch of cologne. Somehow, without ever seeming like he'd tried too hard, he always looked good.

Kegan and Allyson continued their conversation while I did everything but stick my fingers in my ears to stop myself trying to listen to them. I couldn't hear the words, but both of them had low caressing tones in their voices that made me feel sick.

I straightened my wedding rings and dragged my mind back to work. If Allyson was fool enough to be interested in Kegan, it was her problem. I was married, I had tasks to finish, Kegan didn't matter to me any more. I dug in my bag for my notebook and began placing Kegan's furniture orders.

Even with my eyes fixed on my computer screen, I knew when he arrived at my desk. The air around me seemed to change, becoming electric. I didn't turn to him. I didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

"Candy." His voice was barely above a whisper, but I jumped anyhow. Mostly for dramatic effect, but a little bit because his breath had tickled my ear, sending a shudder through me. Why was I still so responsive to him? I didn't want to be.

"Sorry," he said, sitting down uninvited in my extra chair. "How're you doing?"

"Fine, thanks. Just placing your orders." I turned my attention to the screen, then looked back at him. "Did you want me for something?"

His eyes flickered and my cheeks grew warm despite my efforts to control myself. Kegan had a way of turning even the most innocuous comment into an outrageous innuendo. It didn't fluster me so much when we were dating; of course, back then I could act on it.

"I thought we could go to the restaurant this morning."

"Wasn't it supposed to be this afternoon?"

Lou came out of his office just as Kegan said, "I think we did say this afternoon, but I was here to see Richard and I thought we could get an early start." Before I could speak, he added to Lou, "You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," Lou said, and they both looked at me. I didn't want to go, didn't want to give Kegan the satisfaction of changing the schedule on me, but I had no choice.

"Let me just finish this order and I'll be ready," I said. Kegan sat beside me as I finished entering the order, making me so uncomfortable that I flubbed several numbers and had to fix them. At last it was done. I picked up my bag and stuffed the notebook into it. Kegan headed back to the front of the office and Allyson's desk. I followed.

When I reached Allyson, she smiled at me. "We should go for lunch sometime this week. We haven't had time to chat for ages."

Allyson had never expressed even a hint of interest in chatting with me. "Um, sure. When's good for you?"

"Thursday?" Before I could answer, she turned to Kegan. "You're welcome to come too, of course."

A wave of dizziness hit me, but Kegan said, "I have other plans, unfortunately. Maybe another time?"

"That would be great," Allyson said. She blinked suddenly and a blush lit up her face, and I knew he'd brought out the ever-effective wink again. I also knew she and I wouldn't be having lunch on Thursday.

"We should go, Candy," Kegan said. Allyson looked up at me, startled.

I turned to Kegan. "I go by Candice now."

"I'll try to remember," he said, and moved on to open the door for me. My eyes met Allyson's, and she mouthed, "Lucky!" at me. I crossed my eyes at her and left the office.

The taxi was far too small to hold everything I was feeling. Kegan's shirt sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and I could see the dark hairs on his tanned skin. He still wore the same cologne, and memories of our years together swept me as I breathed it in. How many times had he held me, kissed me, made love to me, with that warm rich scent swirling around me? I didn't know, but they were all coming back to me now.

I forced the thoughts from my mind and resolved to breathe only through my mouth to keep them from wafting back to me on his cologne.

"Candy Taylor. How the hell are you?"

I turned to look at him. "I don't use either of those names any more, but I'm fine, thanks," I said, feeling anything but. "Tell me about the restaurant."

Ignoring me, he said, "You're married, I take it?"

I nodded. "Nearly two years now."

"I hope it's going well." He sounded like he meant it, but I didn't trust him.

"Everything's great." It had been, anyhow. Our first year of marriage had been idyllic. Even my mother's subtle (and occasionally not so subtle) disapproval of Ian hadn't dented our happiness. But after that--

"Does your mother like him?"

"She does," I lied.

He shook his head and gave me a wry smile. "Lucky guy. She never liked me."

"Yeah, right. She loved you."

Of all the words I could have chosen, I had to pick 'love'. It seemed to hang in the air above us.

"Did she? I didn't know that," he said after a moment. "She's sure good at hiding it."

She'd loved that Kegan was going to be a lawyer, loved how polished and

outgoing he was. Quiet Ian, and his carpentry career which had meant he didn't need to go to college or university, had been a shock. She still talked about Kegan on a regular basis, but I didn't feel the need to pass along that particular piece of information.

"And your dad likes him," Kegan went on, "because he likes everyone."

I couldn't help smiling. "Very true."

"What do his parents think of you?"

"They liked me."

As soon as the words came out, I realized he'd pick up on the past tense. Sure enough, he raised an eyebrow. "Liked?"

"They were killed in a car accident Christmas Eve. Going out to get a last-minute present for... well, for me. Drunk driver."

"Candy, you poor thing. I'm so sorry," he said, and the sympathy, and the beautiful lack of blame, in his voice brought unexpected tears to my eyes.

Horried, I bit my lip. I would *not* cry in front of Kegan. I'd rather bite my lip clean through. I wasn't usually so easily upset, but the last few weeks had taken a lot out of me. "Thanks. It's been hard to deal with. They were great. Really nice people." I stared at the back of the taxi driver's slightly scruffy head, fighting for control.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Kegan reach to touch my hand, but he stopped inches away then pulled his hand back and cleared his throat. "Do... you don't have to, but do you want to hear about my restaurant now?"

I pulled in a deep shuddering breath and let it out slowly. "Good idea." Work would help. Anything that kept me from thinking about any part of my past would help.

He handed me a blueprint. "How much do you know about these things?"

"A fair bit," I said, feeling my emotions begin to recede as I focused on the task at hand. "Three years with Lou has taught me a lot."

"He's a great guy," he agreed, and then he frowned. "Look, Candy, I can't quite figure out what you're doing there. You ended up getting your psychology degree, I assume?"

I nodded.

"And you're working at a design firm?"

I nodded again. "All you can really do with a psych degree is grad school, and I didn't want to. I was doing secretarial work with an agency, just for the money. Ian's boss did some construction on one of Lou's jobs back when we were dating, and Lou happened to tell him he needed an assistant. He knew I was looking for a job and suggested me, and I've been there ever since."

"Any plans to move up?"

I pushed back a stray strand of hair that had escaped from my clip. "There really isn't anywhere to go unless I become a designer myself."

"Would you like that?"

"I've thought about it. I guess I'm just not sure what I want to be when I grow up," I said, trying to make a joke out of it. Everyone else I knew seemed to have a career. I had a job. I could see the difference between the two, but I didn't know how to get from where I was to there.

Wanting to get off the subject, I said, "I know you always wanted to do the restaurant thing, but how'd you get out of law school?"

"I graduated."

"You actually *went*?" Kegan had hated the very thought of it, but his parents had been insistent that he go. Neither of them had any education past high school, and their only son was going to do better than they had. Regardless of what he wanted.

"Went, focused on commercial law, worked in restaurants every chance I got."

"Are your parents happy with what you're doing now?"

He ran a hand through his hair. "Let's talk about the plans, okay?"

I got the hint.

I followed Kegan into the restaurant, stopping just inside the door for a look around. The place was a shambles, with workers and equipment and materials everywhere. The old restaurant had been all thick carpet and hushed lighting; he was ripping everything away and punching skylights into the vaulted ceiling.

Kegan stood beside me. He seemed taller than I remembered, or maybe it was just that he was a few inches taller than Ian. Either way, I felt small beside him. "What do you think?"

"Those skylights are going to be amazing," I said.

His smile lit up his face. "I think so too. Well, let's get to work. I thought I'd show you around, make sure you know what I want, and then you can tell me what I can have."

"You can have whatever you want," I said without thinking, and then felt the blood flooding my cheeks.

He raised his eyebrows and gave me the sexiest smile I'd ever seen. "Good. Glad to hear it."

Other than that, he was all business. We walked through every inch of the restaurant, he explained what he was envisioning, and I made copious notes. I usually had to pry a client's ideas out one tiny fragment at a time, but Kegan had obviously been planning this for a long time.

"I've already ordered tiles for the front foyer. Granite."

He reached into a cardboard box on the half-demolished bar we were using as a desk and handed me a small square. The granite was a rich blue-grey with silver flakes buried deep inside. I tilted it and the light caught the flakes, making them seem alive.

Kegan said, "That's why I picked it. I did the same thing and it just seemed perfect."

The tile was beautiful, but I didn't like that we were seeing things the same way.
"Can I give this to Lou?"

"That's why I gave it to you," Kegan said, flashing me the kind of smile that once made me melt. I remained resolutely frozen.

We carried on for nearly two hours. The workers occasionally asked him questions about the demolition project, and he always knew exactly what should be removed and what saved. I was impressed with his focus and clarity, even though I didn't want to be impressed with anything about him.

Just after noon, Kegan sent several of the workers out to bring back pizza. Everyone gathered in the middle of the room, sitting on crates or their toolboxes, and chatted as they ate. Not knowing anyone but Kegan, and barely knowing him any more, I just sat and listened. Kegan had made sure I was sitting beside him, but he wasn't paying any attention to me, busy instead with a few workers.

The woman beside me called, "How's your mother doing?" across the group at a young man.

"Not so great," he said.

The woman shook her head. "There's nothing they can do?"

"There doesn't seem to be. They say it won't be long now."

She made a sympathetic noise. "That's so tragic." Turning to me, she said, "She went in for a routine checkup, and a few tests came back strange. Turns out she's got cancer nearly everywhere."

I needed to hear *that* story even less than I needed to have Kegan back in my life. Goose bumps rose on my arms as the story sank into my mind. That could be me.

"That's terrible," I managed to get out. She nodded and went back to her pizza. I tried, but had lost my appetite. As I got up to throw out my leftovers, I saw Kegan turn and look at me. I looked away.

We continued working after lunch, and my list of things to do, investigate, or

order grew until it was nearly seven pages long. We didn't take any real breaks, but I slipped outside and called Lou at four o'clock so he'd know what was going on.

"Sounds like you've got it under control, Candice. Good job."

Before I could say anything, he went on. "Are you okay working with Kegan? You looked surprised to see him."

I nearly admitted that I'd far rather not work with him, but I knew Lou didn't have the time to take it all over. "No, it's fine. It was a bit of a surprise, but it's okay."

"Good stuff," he said, sounding so relieved that I knew I'd done the right thing. "You're going straight home from there, I assume?"

"I think so, unless you need me to come back?"

Please say no, please say no. I just wanted to go home and relax.

"No need, I don't think. Come in sometime tomorrow though, okay?"

Thank you. "Of course. Bye."

Kegan's workers began packing up just after five, but he showed no signs of planning to let me go. I was not going to be there alone with him. I was starting to get used to his presence but I didn't want it to be just us.

I practiced the words in my head to make sure I wouldn't sound like an idiot. After a few adjustments, I said, "Well, I think we got a lot accomplished today. I can be back here tomorrow morning if you'd like, but I should place these orders tomorrow afternoon at the latest."

His eyes searched my face. "You look different, you know."

"I should, it's been ten years."

Still staring at me, he shook his head. "It's not that. There's something wrong, isn't there?"

A wave of panic swept me. *How could he tell?* I fought it down. I certainly wasn't going to tell Kegan about my test result. "No, nothing. It's probably just that Ian's away for the month. That must be it."

"Must be," he said, but he didn't sound convinced.

"Anyhow, I should get going."

"Of course," he said. "I'd give you a ride but my car's in the shop until tomorrow morning. Where are you going? I'll walk you there."

"No, that's okay, really. I'll just see you... did we say when?"

He shook his head. "Around nine?"

"That's fine. See you then."

And I walked out as fast as I could go.

I couldn't help wondering what he'd thought of me. Did he think I looked good? Had he noticed my extra weight? It wasn't much, only ten pounds or so, but it made me feel awkward and uncomfortable. *It doesn't matter*, I told myself. It didn't, of course. Why would it matter what Kegan thought of me?

On the way to the subway station, I passed the gym I'd been considering joining for ages. My doctor had suggested that losing a few pounds would be good for me. This was probably the perfect time to start; I could keep it secret from Ian and impress him when he got back. I turned around, went in, and signed up, promising myself that I'd go every day. Well, maybe not Sunday. But every other day.

Safely alone in my house, I made myself some scrambled eggs for dinner, and Ninja and I watched television and I crocheted until it was time for me to go to bed. But first, my email to Ian.

I hadn't told Ian about working with Kegan because I'd thought it might worry him. Now, though, I felt more like I was hiding it. Since there was nothing to hide, it just seemed like the right thing to do.

As did dragging myself to the gym tomorrow morning. I reset my alarm clock to the right time and set the alarm for far too early. It would be worth it if it gave me the strength to deal with Kegan.

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacatocks@hotmail.com

Subject: Hallooo out there!

You haven't answered yesterday's email. Are you okay? I hope so. I hope it got to you. I don't understand all this computer stuff. :)

You'll never guess who's the newest client at work... Kegan. You know, the one you hate even though you've never met him. I plan to pick very ugly furniture. ;)

Candice

Wednesday, August 3rd

I walked through the brightly lit gym, past far too many people exercising (I'd thought the place would be deserted at seven in the morning, but apparently not), and into the change room.

Trying to avert my eyes, difficult when there was a woman in some state of undress everywhere, I put my jacket and backpack into a locker, gathered up my water bottle and MP3 player and headed back out.

As I filled my bottle from the fountain near the change room door, I took a long, slow look around the place. Everyone else seemed to know what they were doing, but I had no idea where to start. Some of the machines looked vaguely familiar, some looked rather frightening, and a few looked pornographic. Opening my legs wide and then squeezing them shut over and over again was not something I was likely to do in private, never mind in public. I finally decided to start on a treadmill, because I had actually used one before. Once.

Just as I gathered enough courage to move over to the treadmills, a huge man took the last one. A few muscle groups had probably been invented just for this guy. Muscles on muscles on.... more muscles. He was seriously solid.

Denied, I decided on the next best thing, a machine that seemed to resemble cross-country skiing. I'd been skiing once and enjoyed it, so I thought it would be a good choice.

Huge mistake. Huger than the guy who'd stolen my treadmill. Big huge elephant-sized mistake. From the moment I climbed on board, I was like a cat on a hot tin roof. Wearing roller skates. Blindfolded.

When I hit myself in the face the first time with the pole, I stunned myself for a second, but after the fifth collision I hardly noticed. I kept going, fighting the machine, until I was sweaty and panting. How long had I been putting myself through this torture? I checked the machine's demonically glowing red display.

Three minutes.

While I didn't know a lot about exercise, I was pretty sure three minutes wasn't really long enough. I managed to stick it out for two more minutes. The elliptical machine (I heard two girls decide to "go elliptical" and then they got on two machines just like mine, so it must have been an elliptical) reported that I'd burned thirty-seven calories. Didn't seem worth it, somehow.

I saw a treadmill become available and lunged for it. My balance was a little better on the treadmill, so I looked around the gym as I walked. The place was all golden wood and pale ocean colors, and the rest of the exercisers looked just as sleek and elegant. Me and my t-shirt with a cartoon polar bear on it didn't exactly fit in. Nobody seemed to be looking at me, though, so I walked for fifteen minutes. Having achieved a total of twenty minutes of exercise, I felt I could now go and float in the whirlpool with a clear conscience.

I got off the treadmill, walking funny at first because it felt strange to no longer have the ground moving beneath my feet, and headed back to the change room. I put my water bottle and MP3 player back in my locker and quickly stripped off my clothes, wrapped myself up in my towel, and went to the whirlpool.

I had it all to myself, and it was glorious. I simmered gently for nearly ten minutes, then climbed out and sat on the edge for a moment or two until I felt less like a poached chicken. A shower followed, in which I partook liberally of the free and gorgeously scented shampoo and body wash, and then I dressed and headed to McDonald's for breakfast, making a mental note to go grocery shopping soon.

Kegan and I stood in the middle of the huge warehouse. As soon as I'd arrived, he'd whisked me off to help him choose tiles for the bathrooms and kitchen area, but this place seemed filled with enough tiles to redecorate every restaurant in Toronto. Just a bit overwhelming.

"Okay," I said, trying to be the calm professional I needed to be, "Lou needs to approve of whatever we come up with, but naturally it's mostly up to you. What were you thinking of for the bathrooms?"

"I don't have any particular color in mind, but I definitely want them to look clean. Not too fussy."

Shiny then, probably, or at least not heavily textured. Absorbed in the design puzzle, I found it much easier to talk to Kegan. "What about glass tile?"

He frowned. "I've only ever seen them in clear or frosted glass. I want color."

"That's glass block. I'm talking tiles. Over here." I led him to the glass tile display. "See? Lots of colors."

The tiles were indeed in every color I could imagine. Beautiful iridescent silver ones caught my eye and I moved in for a closer look. "What about these?"

His shoulder brushed mine as he leaned in to examine the tiles, and I pulled away. "Yeah, I like those. I don't think I want just one color though."

I scanned the tiles again and spotted the same iridescence in a watery blue tile and a rich teal, one on each side of the display. Pointing them out, I said, "These would work with the silver."

Kegan looked back and forth between the tiles. "Does that blue go with the teal?"

"You don't see it?" It was so obvious to me. "Wait here a second."

I ducked off to the reception desk and returned with a sample of each tile, holding them out on a blank page of my notebook for his perusal. "The teal has the same blue in it, and the silver has a bit of both, so they work."

Kegan nodded his head slowly. "I didn't think so before, but you're right. I like it, but I still feel like it would need an accent of something, to offset all the glass."

I shut my eyes for a second, picturing a wall with the tiles. He was right. I opened my eyes and turned to him. "What about a thin row of stainless steel?"

He blinked, obviously taken aback.

"They do make stainless steel tiles," I said.

"I don't doubt it. It's not that." He gave me a considering look. "I didn't tell you, did I?"

"Tell me what?"

"I finally decided last night what to name the restaurant. I'm calling it Steel."

"Really? Then they'd be perfect."

"They would." He smiled. "You're good at this."

"I like design and color and things," I said. "But I have to close my eyes to see them and it makes me feel silly." *Stop talking, Candice.*

"Hey, if you get ideas like that when you close your eyes, keep closing them," he said, his eyes warm. "Clients won't care. I know I don't." He smiled at me again.

I was suddenly uncomfortably aware that we were all alone in the end of the warehouse, with only tiles for chaperones. Tiles, and my wedding rings. "Let's go find stainless steel tiles and make sure they look right."

About an hour later, tiles ordered and samples collected for Lou, I braced myself for the taxi ride back to the newly named Steel, but was saved by the ringing of Kegan's cell phone as soon as we got into the car. From the side of the conversation I could hear, the painter he'd hired had overbooked himself and wasn't going to be in when he'd promised.

Once that was straightened out, by Kegan telling him that if he wasn't there by the end of the week he'd find someone else, Kegan began a rapid-fire series of

phone calls to everyone from his lawyer to the repair shop which apparently still hadn't finished with his car. I flipped through my notebook and tried not to eavesdrop, but I came away with one clear realization: Kegan knew what he wanted and he was determined to get it.

We were only a few minutes away from the restaurant when Kegan said, "Just one more call." The look on his face said it was the toughest call yet. The hand not holding the phone closed into a fist in his lap.

"Hey, Mom. I just wanted to tell you how things are-- she did? Well, that's great. Tell her I hope it does well. But I wanted to-- you do? Okay. I'll talk to you later."

He snapped the phone closed and shoved it back into the pocket of his sleek black dress pants, then sat in silence. I did too; the tension coming off him was hard to take. I longed to break it but didn't know what to say.

Kegan turned to me, a muscle flickering in his jaw. "God, I hate that woman sometimes. I'm opening a restaurant and all she can talk about is my sister and the new *fish* she bought for her kid's aquarium. If it's not that, it's all about my brother's hockey career. Would it kill her to pretend she's happy for me? It's *my* life. Isn't it up to me how I live it?"

"Of course," I said, both because it was obviously the answer he wanted and because I believed it. "Why do parents have to be like that? We're adults now. We can choose what we want to do, how we want to live."

Kegan stared at me for a second, and then gave me a slow smile. "Your mother doesn't like your husband, does she?"

I scrunched up my face before admitting, "Not so much."

"Why'd you say she did?"

"Dunno." I did know; it didn't seem fair to Ian to tell Kegan that my mother preferred him. But telling Kegan *that* didn't seem like a great plan either.

"Don't lie to me, Candy. You were always so open with me. I knew you better than I knew anyone else. I missed that when you were gone." He was right, I had been open like that... and it had given him easier access to break me into tiny

pieces.

Our eyes met, and he added, "I missed *you*. Did you miss me?"

I nodded, unable to look away. "Of course. It was so weird not having you around. Everything seemed wrong."

"I was sure you'd call and try to get me back."

I'd considered it a thousand times. Larissa had done everything but break my fingers to stop me picking up the phone, and she'd threatened to do that too. All I said, though, was, "I thought about it."

A faint smile curled the corners of his mouth. "But you didn't."

I shook my head.

"And then you met your husband."

It wasn't a question. I nodded. "I had a few other boyfriends, all terrible, and then I met Ian and we got married just over a year later."

"And he's not terrible."

"Never." Well, once. But I didn't think he'd meant to be.

"That's good. You deserve to be happy." He smiled at me and laid his hand on mine. The taxi jerked to a halt, I pulled my hand away to pick up my bag, and we climbed out.

His touch seemed burned into my skin.

He was the consummate professional once we entered the restaurant, and we worked steadily, getting a lot done and gradually becoming more comfortable with each other, until a bit after eleven o'clock, at which point somebody called, "Anyone want coffee?" A chorus of agreement swept through the building, and I joined in.

Kegan said quickly, "I'll go get it. Candy, you can come help me."

The staff surrounded me, and I wrote down everyone's request. Once the list was complete, we set off. After walking in silence for a few minutes, we started talking at once. We both stopped, and he said, "Go ahead."

"Oh, no, you go ahead."

"I insist."

"I just wondered, why is your deadline so soon?"

"It was my first day at law school. I like the idea of starting this on the same date."

"Ah. But it's a bit of a rush. Why not wait until next year?"

"I needed to do it now. Okay, my turn to ask a question." His tone made it clear that the topic was closed. "Where do people go for fun in this part of town?"

"You mean nightclubs and stuff?"

He said, "Yeah. Take you for instance. What do you do on a weekend night?"

"Well, usually I stay home. But if I do go out, everyone goes to Light these days."

"That's the big nightclub down by Lake Ontario?"

I nodded. "It's huge. Mostly a younger crowd, but every other weekend they do an 80's and 90's night. But they wouldn't be your competition. Totally different thing."

He shrugged. "Anywhere people go to spend money is my competition. Okay, good to know."

Another question came to mind. "Why is your restaurant on this side of the city when you live down by the lake? I mean, you used to live there, anyhow. I don't know where you live now." I didn't want him to think I'd been stalking him online or something like that. I *had* looked him up, maybe once a year or so, but I'd never found anything interesting.

"I'm not in the apartment I used to have, but I am still by the lake. I bought a condo. My parents are in their old house down there too. That's why the restaurant is on this side."

I wrinkled my forehead as I tried to process this. It didn't make a lot of sense. "Wouldn't it be easier for you if you lived near the restaurant?"

He sighed. "Yes, but it wouldn't be easier for my parents. They don't want it anywhere near their house."

"Why not?"

"You know why not. They wanted a lawyer for a son, not 'some chef'." His bitterness was clear, and I felt sorry for him.

The subject of parents, especially mothers, and their lack of support was a sore spot for me. "You're the owner, not the chef. And even if you *were* the chef, they should support you." My voice was louder than I'd intended in my indignation, and he smiled.

"You're sweet. And you're right. But they don't. Nothing I can do about it."

We arrived at the coffee shop as he finished his last words. He held the door open for me, and put his hand gently on my shoulder as I walked past him, guiding me through the door. I could feel the heat of his hand through my light shirt and walked a little faster to get away from him. It wasn't as bad as I'd thought it would be, working with him, but I didn't like the shivers his touch sent through me.

We went to the counter, and after that we were far too busy imparting the complicated coffee orders to talk.

Our walk back to the restaurant was all business. When we returned to the restaurant and distributed the coffees, everyone pulled out money and tried to pay Kegan back. He waved them all off.

"What kind of boss would I be if I didn't treat you guys occasionally?"

They looked unsure of the right answer, so they just thanked him profusely and

wandered off with their coffees. Kegan and I worked together, choosing tables and chairs from several catalogues, until about twelve-thirty. His obvious passion for the restaurant brought a lump to my throat a few times, but I didn't think he noticed.

"I should get back to the office and order some of this stuff," I said.

"Okay. What time will you be here tomorrow?"

I took a deep breath. "I won't be. We've got nearly everything down now, and the last few things will depend on how Lou does the actual design. He should have it done early next week, but he can't do it until I do the legal research for it."

"So I'll see you next week?"

"You'll see Lou," I said.

"But I want to see you."

I shook my head, feeling flustered by his insistence and silly for letting myself imagine he meant it personally. "Lou'll be here. I don't usually have client contact after the initial stage." I felt my cheeks grow hot at the thought of having contact with Kegan. His eyes sparkled a little, and I felt even more embarrassed, and angry with myself at how I was reacting to him.

"I'd rather have you." He paused, eyes locked on my face, and then added, "I've already started working with you."

There, not personal. "It won't happen. Lou always--"

I was cut off by the ringing of Kegan's cell phone. He looked aggravated but reached for it and barked, "Hello?"

As he listened to the caller, I threw him a smile, mouthed, "Bye," and got the heck out of there before he could talk to me again.

Back at the office, I went right to work on the preliminary legal research for Kegan's restaurant. It required approximately eight million phone calls to nine million people asking about tiny little details. It was exhausting.

Knowing it was for Kegan made it all seem so much more critical. Every decision I made, from which potential suppliers to list to which font to use on my documentation, was a reflection on me. I swung wildly between wanting to make the best impression possible and wanting to prove I didn't care. It didn't make for high productivity, but I managed to get nearly half of it done by mid-afternoon.

I gave what I'd finished to Lou. He was cautiously pleased, and I was delighted. I often only got a response of 'okay' from him; any serious expression of pleasure, no matter how cautious, meant I was doing a pretty great job. Feeling refreshed by his acknowledgement, I got back to work on the rest of the research.

At least, I did until he came back ten minutes later. "Kegan wants you to call him. Do you have his number?"

I shook my head, the energy and happiness draining away in an instant. "Did he say why?"

"I faxed him the research, so that might be it," Lou said. "Let me know if he needs something else from me, okay?"

"Will do," I said, and waited until he'd returned to his office before picking up the phone, which seemed to weigh a thousand pounds in my hand.

"Hello," he said, his voice somehow darker and richer than it had been in person.

"Kegan, it's Candi--"

"I know," he said. "Call display."

"Oh," I said, and neither of us spoke for a few seconds.

"Would you go out for dinner with me tonight?"

"Pardon?"

"You heard me," he said. "I want to take you out for dinner."

"Why?"

"Because we haven't seen each other for ten years?"

"So?"

"I want to get to know you again."

"Why?" I said again, fighting off the urge to say yes, to go out with him and laugh and relax and forget about cancer and car accidents and absent husbands. Even working with Kegan had been more fun than I'd had in a long time, and dinner would be wonderful. Which was precisely why I couldn't go.

He paused. "I just thought it might be nice. Nice to have someone to talk to. Never mind. Goodbye, Candy."

And he was gone.

Just before five, as I worked half-heartedly on some of the menial tasks that had come my way during the day and tried not to dwell on the possibility I'd offended Kegan, a client, I heard Tigger laugh. Woo-hoo-hoo-hoo!

My predecessor had made the computer make that sound whenever email arrived, and I hadn't figured out how to turn it off. Other than the fact that my coworkers echoed the sound every single time, I actually quite liked it, although I would never have admitted that to anyone.

One new message, from Larissa. She didn't usually email me at work, so I was surprised.

To: canw@sapphireinteriordesign.com

From: larissabobissa@hotmail.com

Subject: What's the deal, orange peel?

Candice,

I haven't heard from you since Monday. Are you all right? Are WE all right? You're not mad because I said Kegan was bad for you, are you? You know he is. Did you get your test results or something?

If I've done something wrong, let me know. If not, I hope you're OK.

L.

I felt a sudden flash of anger. We hadn't talked for two days, because I'd been busy and tired, and suddenly she sent me this?

With incredible speed, though, the anger was replaced by a flood of tears. Shocked, I managed to bite them back before I bawled all over the office. I clenched my teeth until I had myself mostly under control, then fled the office and hurried to the subway station, stopping only to throw on my MP3 player and turn it up until I couldn't hear myself think.

As I unlocked my front door, I burst into tears. Exploded, really. I couldn't stop. Couldn't catch my breath. My head was spinning and my eyes were burning. Ninja danced around in front of me trying to give me some comfort, but succeeded only in nearly tripping me to the floor. I eventually reached the couch, threw myself down, ripped off the MP3 player, and let go.

I cried without stopping for two hours. I'd read books where people "cried for hours" and I'd always assumed it was just a phrase, or poetic license. This was real. I cried for two solid hours. A few times I managed to calm myself down to a dull roar, but it didn't last. Ninja head-butting me in sympathy, catching sight of my new bear and thinking of my stiff and awkward parting with Ian at the airport, the thought of what my eyes would look like tomorrow - no matter how small the provocation, I was set off again and the flood began anew.

When I finally stopped, I felt light-headed, drained, and utterly dehydrated. I gulped down three huge glasses of water, then took my fourth glass into the bathroom, filled the tub with hot water, and climbed in after adding nearly a whole bottle of 'Calm Serenity' bath oil, a concept which seemed rather beyond me but a good idea nonetheless.

What had just happened? It was like I'd never cried before and it had all come out at once, like I was crying for a million big and small things that had gone wrong in my life. Was this just about Ian? Or my fear of the test results? Or was there more going on?

I picked up a book from beside the tub, not wanting to think any more. I'd read the novel maybe ten times, so it was easy to lose myself in the story again. When

the water went cool, I dried myself and put on my favorite pajamas, a teal blue nightshirt with white polar bears. I decided to check my email before bed; I figured an email from Ian would cheer me up.

Bad move. After I read Ian's waiting email, short but definitely not sweet, the day went downhill even more. I slammed out a reply and shut down the computer in a rage.

How dare he?

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacat rocks@hotmail.com

Subject: Re: Re: Hallooo out there!

First, I'm not 'seeing' Kegan. I'm working. What was I supposed to do, tell Lou to let the contract go? And you asked why I didn't tell you about it the first day? I was afraid you'd be just like this.

Second, you know Lou never lets me do the client contact stuff, at least not after the first little bit.

Third, get over yourself.

Oh, and I'm doing fine here by myself, thanks for asking. Oh wait, you didn't.

Candice

Thursday, August 4th

When the alarm went off at six, it took me a second to remember why my eyes were sore and swollen. I dragged myself into the bathroom and splashed water on my face until I felt halfway human, then rubbed myself dry and checked the damage. My eyes did look tired, but nowhere near as bad as they could have been. I still felt awful, though. Crying yourself to sleep will do that.

Even though I was exhausted, my muscles didn't seem sore from the previous day's workout. Pleased with that, I put on a t-shirt and shorts and packed my work clothes into my backpack, noticing as I did that I was down to my last few

pairs of underwear, the ones I only wore when I had to. I threw a load of laundry into the machine on my way out to the gym, leaving the laundry soap on the kitchen counter as we always did to remind us to dry and put away the clothes.

I started out on a treadmill, but to my surprise found myself wanting to try the elliptical again. The other gym people seemed to really enjoy it, and I wondered what I was missing.

After a few minutes on the treadmill, an elliptical that was a bit away from the main pack opened up, and I decided to give it a shot. I hopped off my treadmill and hustled over to the machine before someone else could take it.

At first, I felt sure everyone was watching me, but after a minute or so I was having too much fun to care. Fun at the gym. I'd never thought it was possible. Somehow I was so much more coordinated than I'd been yesterday. I only hit myself in the face once with the poles, and I stayed on for nearly seven minutes before my legs were burning too much to continue.

I did a few more minutes on the treadmill before soaking in the whirlpool. My body felt relaxed and loose, and I wished I could work out my mind and emotions in the same way. I showered and dressed quickly, hoping to get to the office before Lou and get further ahead in Kegan's research.

I made it there at eight-thirty, well before Lou's usual arrival time, so I was surprised when he burst out of his office and greeted me with a heartfelt, "I'm so glad you're here!"

So you can fire me? I thought, before getting a grip on myself. Kegan wouldn't have told Lou he'd asked me to dinner, and Lou wouldn't have cared if I'd said no, as long as I was polite. Which I was. Sort of. "You are? Why?"

"We have another new client," Lou said, herding me ahead of him into his office. "This one wants to open in a month."

I stopped dead in my tracks, and Lou ran into me. I heard a few quickly smothered snickers from the peanut gallery of my coworkers, but didn't pay any attention to them. "One month?"

Lou hurried around me. "Yes, which is why I need you to get in here."

I sat down in Lou's visitor chair, and he raced through the day's events. "I'm supposed to be seeing Kegan today, and I also have meetings with Frank and with Fred *and* with this new client *and* another possible new one. I'll try to cancel at least one, but I don't think I can. I'll have Allyson clear my--"

Lou picked up his phone and asked Allyson to reschedule all of the appointments he had the next day for some time the next week. He wasn't really supposed to ask Allyson to do anything, but I didn't say a word. She was under worked and over paid, in my opinion. She might as well do something.

"Okay, so now I'll at least be able to do some actual work tomorrow. For today, though, you are it."

"What do you need me to do?"

He frowned. "I thought I said it already. For today you're with Kegan."

"Me! But--"

"Haven't you been listening, Candice? I can't get out of today's meetings, and he needs to know what I've come up with so far and you need to find out what else he needs."

I stared at him. This was my big chance to impress Lou with my client skills. But with *Kegan*? And after I'd refused his dinner invitation, would he even be willing to talk to me?

Lou's face had been getting steadily darker as I sat stunned, but it cleared, and he said, "I get it. Are you nervous about being the main contact?"

"I... yes, Lou, I'm nervous," I said, grabbing at this logical and convenient straw. "I've never done it before, and on such an important job, well..."

Lou tilted his head. "I don't think it's a particularly important job, it's just a rush one. Anyhow, don't be nervous, you'll be fine. You're basically just going to make sure my design works for him."

"Okay," I said, nodding like a bobble head doll.

"I have faith in you," he said, smiling at me and standing up from his desk to

show me it was time for me to go.

I went.

"What?" Kegan's voice, brusque and impatient, seemed to ricochet out of my cell phone and bounce through my body.

"Um, it's Candice. I'm--"

"Candy, hi." The change in his voice!

"I'm outside," I said, fighting hard not to feel warmed by his tone. "Could you let me in?"

"Of course," he said. "I thought Lou was coming."

"He was going to, but he's got some meetings he can't cancel."

"I'm not important enough for him to cancel his meetings?"

"No, no--"

"I'm not?"

I realized what I'd said. "No, that's not it at all. You're very important. He just can't get out of them. He did try but--"

The door opening in front of me cut me off. Kegan snapped his phone closed and stepped out onto the sidewalk, letting the door close behind him. "I just wanted to hear you say I'm important," he said, a smile flickering at the corner of his mouth.

"Did I say important? I meant impossible," I said as I walked past him toward the door. As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I spun to face him, horrified.

"I'm sorry." I took an involuntary step backward; my turning around had put us dangerously close together. "I shouldn't have said that. You're a client."

"I shouldn't have been impossible," he said, giving me a wink and holding the

door open for me. I passed through, not sure if I'd won or lost, or even if it had been a competition.

We spent nearly an hour going through Lou's initial designs. I'd never been the one to present the designs before, but I'd seen Lou do it enough times that I was fairly comfortable.

Or would have been, if it had been anybody but Kegan. Sitting close beside him, I could feel the heat of his body and smell his cologne. I forced myself to focus on the designs and be cool and professional.

Kegan didn't seem bothered by our nearness. He paid careful attention to every part of the design, pointing out things he liked and things that needed to be changed. I wrote down everything, including his reasons when they weren't obvious, and I knew Lou would be impressed with my detail.

When we were about half finished, some of his workers needed his attention. After checking with me to make sure it was okay, Kegan went over to them. I continued looking at the plans for a minute or two, and then turned to see if he was still busy. He was, but instead of going back to the plans I kept my eyes on him.

I'd really never believed he'd be able to defy his parents and go for his dream. Seeing him now, I couldn't understand why I'd felt that way. He was clearly so happy to be where he was, and so sure of what he wanted. I felt tears tingling at the back of my eyes as I watched him. What would it be like to have such a strong desire and to see it fulfilled?

He said one last thing to the workers who'd been surrounding him, everyone smiled, and Kegan headed back in my direction. I dropped my eyes to the plans, hoping he wouldn't know I'd been watching him.

"Sorry about that," he said when he reached me.

I shook my head. "Not a problem."

He smiled at me and sat down. "Let's get back to it."

"Okay. Well, this is what Lou suggested for the lighting..."

Kegan studied the plan. "Perfect. I'd heard Lou was great with lighting. This is exactly what I wanted."

A question sparked in my mind at his words, and before I could think it through, I asked it. "Did you know I worked there?"

He turned to me. "How could I have known?"

That wasn't the question. I shrugged. "I don't know. Did you?"

He gave me a half-smile and shook his head. "I didn't know until you came into his office on Monday. Why?"

"Just curious," I said. He hadn't seemed surprised to see me, but why would he lie?

"I can't say I *mind* working with you, but I didn't know."

"Okay," I said, choosing to ignore the first part of his sentence. "Well, let's get back to work."

"All right," he said, moving closer to me and leaning over the plans.

When we were finished, I went back to the office. Kegan offered to drive me, but I managed to convince him I'd be fine on the subway. I needed time away from him.

I spent the afternoon placing orders and typing up my notes for Lou. I took a short break, to email Larissa and tell her that I was fine, that I hadn't got the results yet, and that I knew Kegan was bad for me so she shouldn't worry, and then went back to working on Kegan's restaurant. My mind kept wandering to him instead of the work, to whether he'd had something specific to talk about at dinner or had really just wanted to get to know me again. I hauled my mind back to the research every time, but it was exhausting all the same.

Near the end of the day, Allyson wandered over and perched on the edge of my desk. "How'd you get so lucky?"

"Pardon?" I knew what she meant, but I didn't want to talk to her at all, much less about--

"Kegan," she said, fanning herself. "I'd love to work with him."

"Be my guest."

She laughed. I hadn't been joking, but she didn't seem to care. "What's he like?"

"How would I know? I just met him."

"Really, 'Candy'?" She shot me the bright smile that annoyed me so much.

"Didn't sound like it. Should I ask him?"

No, because he'd tell her. I shook my head. "Not much to say, really. I knew him in university. He was friends with my boyfriend."

I didn't want her to know the truth. I didn't trust her, for one thing, and it might make things awkward at work if everyone knew I'd dated Kegan.

"And you didn't go after him instead? I would have. He's gorgeous. It's those eyes, I think. The rest is pretty good too, but his eyes are--"

"There's more to life than looks, you know."

Allyson blinked twice and didn't speak for a moment. I was just starting to regret my words and their sarcastic tone when she said, "Not if you look like that."

She and Kegan would look great together, her delicate blondness and his dark hair and strong body. Way better than I'd looked with him.

She walked back to her desk, leaving my thoughts in even more disarray.

Once I got home, I put the socks and underwear into the dryer, heated up and ate a frozen dinner in less than ten minutes, and then slumped onto the couch. I felt tired but also jumpy and nervous. I reached for the remote control, but then decided that a gym visit would be better for me. And it might have been, had I not chosen a class instead of working out by myself. Foolishly, I thought it might be easier.

It was a beginner step class. If those people were beginners, I was the queen of Siberia. About the only good thing to say about the class is that I didn't actually

kill anyone. The two people I knocked over were really good sports about it.

I went home after class and showered there. I'd embarrassed myself enough for one day; I didn't want anyone seeing me naked to wrap it up.

After my shower, I headed to the computer to email Ian, feeling strange. I was doing well on Kegan's restaurant, as far as I could tell, but seeing him made me feel a complicated mix of emotions, mostly negative. The step class disaster was the kind of thing that I'd be able to laugh about in a few years, but at the moment I felt stupid. And antagonizing Allyson wasn't bright either, since everyone else thought she was wonderful. Overall, not my best day.

I turned on the computer to check my email, expecting to have one from Ian, but there was nothing. I hit the refresh button a few times, hoping to somehow make the computer give up an email it was hiding, but no luck.

Did I want to send one to him? I was annoyed with his attitude, but I could understand it. If it had been reversed, I probably wouldn't have wanted him working with some woman he'd loved before me.

I set my elbows on the desk and rested my head in my hands. I'd meant to be spending time each night thinking about our marriage, about what I wanted to do, and now he'd been gone for four days and I hadn't done even one night. And I didn't want to.

How do you sit down and decide if your marriage can be fixed? How do you make yourself feel love for someone when you know you love him but just don't feel it any more? I didn't have a clue.

Instead of giving it a try, I went down to the basement to get the laundry. Once I had everything folded, I put my own clothes away. Ian had taken most of his socks and underwear with him, but there were a few pairs of both left over, so I opened his dresser drawer.

In the nearly empty drawer lay something vibrantly colored, every shade of blue imaginable. It looked like... but it couldn't be...

It was. It was the yarn I'd been coveting for months. Thin and delicate, pure silk, and the richest colors I'd ever seen. I'd bored Ian senseless with my raving over it, but the price was out of my reach. I crocheted fast so was always in need of

more supplies; spending a good month's worth of crochet budget on one skein of yarn had never seemed like a great plan.

I turned the yarn in my hand, feeling its softness, and a piece of paper fluttered to the floor. Scooping it up, I read, "Candice, I hope you have fun with this while I'm gone. Love, Ian" and tears filled my eyes. I'd never told him the brand name of the yarn, so he must have gone to the store and described it until they figured out which one he meant. And he hated the yarn store.

Leaving his socks and underwear on the bed, I took the yarn to the computer to check my usual pattern sites to see if anything seemed right. I came up empty, though; I wanted to make something stunningly beautiful from Ian's gift, not just something good. Something worthy of the yarn. I'd have to invent it myself.

I found a cheaper yarn of a similar weight and took both yarns down to the living room. Ninja lay beside me, snoring, and I tried and ripped out a multitude of stitches and patterns. The design took shape in my mind as I worked; I wanted it to be a shawl, something that I could wear year-round, and I wanted it to show off the beauty of the yarn and its color changes.

Attempt after attempt grew and was unraveled under my hands. Ian had always been fascinated by my lack of interest in following patterns, since his work involved careful attention to pre-written plans. I often used patterns for reference but the creativity of it was the part I adored, making something that had never existed before.

We'd had many discussions about the feeling of finally recognizing the right stitch, or the right thing to add to a client's restaurant to make it unique, and I'd mentioned at least once that this yarn would require all my skill and attention to find the perfect design. He'd obviously remembered.

At last, I found the right stitch. As soon as I began I knew, no doubt in my mind, but I did a few rows just to be sure, then began to crochet with the new yarn, loving the feeling of it sliding over my fingers. The stitch did highlight the colors perfectly, so I wrote down what I'd come up with and was about to start creating the shawl when I realized I was exhausted. Checking the clock, I realized I'd been playing for nearly two hours.

After tucking the yarn away carefully into a drawer so Ninja couldn't ruin it, I went back to the computer to email Ian.

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacatocks@hotmail.com

Subject: How're you doing today?

I hope you're doing well out there. It must be so hot! It's hot here, but nothing like there, I guess.

I'm sorry you were upset about Kegan. He's being professional, and so am I. It'll be over in a day or two.

I did the laundry today. That yarn is perfect. I can't believe you went in there and got it for me. Thank you so much. I'm making something special out of it. Might not be done by the time you get home but I will try.

Write back soon.

C

My fingers itched to return to the yarn but I had to go to sleep. I considered bringing the yarn into the bedroom so I could look at it as I fell asleep, but dismissed this as both obsessive and pathetic. Instead, I took the polar bear Ian had given me at the airport and set it on my bedside table.

Guarded by the bear, visions of yarn dancing in my head, I fell asleep instantly.

Friday, August 5th

When I woke up, my recurring dream of being that polar bear on the ice floe fresh in my mind, I felt like it might be a good day... until I tried to sit up. Every muscle in my body, even muscles I hadn't known I had, cried out in agony as I moved. I eventually managed to get to my feet, and the pain seemed to lessen as I staggered around and around the bedroom, so I decided to go to the gym anyhow. I took Ian's bear with me on my slow stiff way down the stairs and left it in the living room so I'd be able to see it more often than just as I fell asleep.

After the disastrous step class, I was convinced I was meant to work out alone. I slunk into the gym, hoping I wouldn't see anyone from the night before. I didn't

see anyone, but I did hear a sudden burst of giggling as I entered the change room. I tried to convince myself that it had nothing to do with me, since nobody seemed to be looking at me as I snuck peeks around the room, but I didn't believe me.

I managed to stay on the elliptical machine for nearly ten minutes, and followed that up with twenty minutes on the treadmill. Both were a struggle, but I made myself stick it out and keep going.

After a soak in the whirlpool and a hot shower, I picked up a bagel and coffee for breakfast on my way to work, and was surprised by how energized I felt. Unfortunately, it didn't last once I saw the mound of paperwork nearly burying my desk. I ate my bagel with my back turned, then forced myself to get to work.

Buried in the horrors of endless bylaws and regulations, I didn't realize Lou was standing over me until he cleared his throat. I jumped, smashing my hand against the edge of my desk.

"Ow! Hi, what's up?"

"Can I see you in my office for a minute?"

"Of course."

As we walked to his office, I ran frantically through the last few days in my mind to try to spot something I'd done that Lou would be upset about, but nothing came to mind except my discomfort about presenting the designs, and we'd already dealt with that. He didn't really seem angry, but I had seen him in the past go from Bruce Banner to the Incredible Hulk, only a bit less green, in seconds, so that didn't mean much.

"Have a seat," he invited, gesturing to the two visitor chairs beside his huge mahogany desk. He sat down in his own chair, and I was reminded painfully of my job interview, when I'd tripped over the carpet on the way in and hit my head on his desk, knocking myself out cold. After the paramedics had left, I'd offered to clean up my blood on the floor, and Lou had laughed and offered me the job on the spot.

Was he about to tell me he regretted that snap decision?

"Candice, I need a favor."

Sweet relief. I raised my eyebrows in a "Go on, good man, and know I will help" way.

"I'm really overbooked these days, and the client meetings in particular are just killing me. Would you be willing to completely take on one client? I'd still do the designs, of course, but you'd be responsible for presenting everything and making sure it's right."

"Of course," I said, thrilled. Maybe designing *was* in my future. This would certainly be a step in the right direction. I wanted to get my 'yes' out there quickly before he changed his mind.

"Great."

He sounded so relieved that I started to feel a little nervous. "Lou," I said slowly, "why do you want me to do this? Why not just delay Fred or Frank a bit? They don't even have their opening dates set yet, so they wouldn't care."

"Well, to be honest, the client requested you."

"Really? I-- oh."

Kegan. It had to be. "Which client, Lou?"

"Kegan Underwood," he said, and I felt like a herd of elephants were doing jumping jacks in my stomach. An exercise class for miniscule pachyderms. "He says you did a great job yesterday with the initial designs and he'd like to keep working with you."

Why, Kegan, why? No way had I been evil enough in a past life to deserve this. I pursed my lips and looked at Lou.

"What?"

"I.... can't I work with someone else?"

He folded his hands together on his desk. "Why?"

Why indeed. I just couldn't tell my boss, "Because I used to sleep with him." How unprofessional. Besides, I was married and therefore it didn't matter. So, I did the only thing I could think of.

I lied.

"Lou, I really appreciate the opportunity, I do. I have to say, though, that Kegan's restaurant is quite demanding and I'm not sure I'll have time to do all my other work and meet with him as well. I don't want to let you down."

There. Just thinking of the good of the company. How could he find fault with that?

Quite easily, as it turned out.

"Candice, I considered your workload before deciding to assign you to this task."

Assigning me? A second ago, hadn't he been asking me if I'd be willing? Before I could say anything, although I had no idea what to say, he swept on.

"Not only that, but I must say I'm not impressed with your attitude at the moment. I had expected you to jump at this chance to gain client contact, especially since you'll never be promoted to designer without it."

Client contact. I wasn't at all sure Kegan's brand of client contact would be Lou-approved. Not to mention Ian-approved.

"I--"

"No, Candice. It's final. You will take on these meetings, and I expect a good report from Kegan or your job may not be quite as secure."

I stared at him in shock, but he simply said, "You may leave." I did, and he closed the door behind me. As if I didn't have enough problems at the moment, now my job depended on Kegan's opinion of me.

An hour or so later, I was grimly slogging my way through the research when my phone rang. I glanced at the call display and felt a wave of heat and terror sweep over me, but I cleared my throat and answered the phone as professionally as I could.

"Candy, has Lou talked to you?"

"Yes," I said, wishing I had the guts to say I had no idea what he was talking about and make him explain it, make him tell me why he'd done it. "I'll be working with you from now on."

I could hear the smile in his voice as he said, "Wonderful. I'm sure we'll be great together. Do you have time to come over now? I have a few questions about your research."

"Of course."

"Perfect. I'll have a coffee here for you."

"Thanks." Thanks so much.

When I arrived, he met me at the door with, "I hope you don't mind working with me."

"You could have warned me," I said. "I was surprised when Lou asked me."

"But you agreed to it."

"I wasn't really given much choice."

My bitterness must have come through; Kegan said, "I thought it would help you out if you did it, so Lou could see how great a job you did and be impressed."

"You did?"

He nodded. "Plus, like I said, we've already been working together and I don't want to start again with Lou."

Since he'd started with Lou before me, that didn't make a lot of sense, but I didn't want to argue any more. "Well, now that I'm here, let's get to work. You said you had questions?"

He nodded, but the ringing of my cell phone cut him off. I checked the screen. "Sorry, it's Lou," I said. "Do you mind?"

"Of course not," he said, and I answered, feeling uncomfortable both about talking to Lou and about Kegan hearing me talking to Lou.

"Where'd you leave Frank's file?" Lou said, his voice tight. "He just called and I need it."

I walked Lou, for probably the fifteenth time, through Richard's complicated filing system. As the call wore on, Kegan gave me a smile and wandered off.

Once he finally located the file, Lou said, "Are things okay there?"

"Just fine," I said.

"Good." Lou paused, then added, "Candice, if you get stuck at all, don't forget you can ask me anything, okay?"

Recognizing this as Lou's attempt to smooth over our disagreement, I said, "Thanks. I will."

"Good stuff. See you on Monday."

I hung up the phone and looked around for Kegan, eventually spotting him standing in the far corner of the main eating area, surveying the scene with an expression bordering on awe. He turned to me, startled, as I arrived beside him, and I froze, seeing something I hadn't noticed at first. "Kegan? Are you okay?"

He shifted to face me, wiping away the single tear I'd seen just below his eye. "This place means a lot to me, Candy."

I'd never seen Ian cry over his parents. I'd heard him once, the day they'd died, but he'd sent me away. He'd said the most hurtful thing anyone had ever said to me and sent me away, and I'd never seen any real emotion from him again. And Kegan was crying over his restaurant?

He took a step closer to me. "A very good friend wanted me to open the restaurant. We talked about it all the time, and I promised I'd do it some day, promised I'd let him bring his lawyer buddies in and give him free food."

When he didn't speak again, I said, "And now you're doing it. He must be--"

"He's dead," Kegan said.

Stunned by his bluntness, I searched for a response, but he went on. "I've never said that right out loud. George is dead. Damn it, he's not supposed to be dead."

The anger and pain in his voice made me want to hug him hard, but I couldn't. I put my hand on his arm instead, and he put his over it and squeezed. "He was my age. Guys in their thirties aren't supposed to have heart attacks, you know? And now he'll never see Steel. It's not right."

"No, it's not," I said through the lump in my throat. His hand on mine was warm and strong, and so alive. None of the sparkly shocks like there'd been before when he'd touched me, just the companionship and comfort we both needed. "When did he..."

"Three weeks ago."

"Is that why the short deadline?"

He nodded. "Anniversary of the day I met him. George would have laughed his head off. 'Waits around for years and then throws himself on the grenade.'" He shook his head. "And he'd probably be right."

Kegan gave my hand another squeeze then let it go, and I dropped it away from his arm. He took a deep breath. "Well, enough about me. You've got the research? Let's get to it."

I followed him to the desk, amazed both that he'd had such a strong reaction and that he'd let me see it. I wasn't used to men who'd even admit they *had* feelings, never mind display them in public. We sat beside each other and I dug in my bag for my notebook and Lou's files.

"Thanks for listening, Candy," Kegan said, so softly I barely heard him. I turned to face him, and the sweet, nearly shy, look on his face choked me up again. Unable to speak, I just smiled. He smiled back, holding my gaze, then said, "I'm happy to return the favor if you want me to."

Suddenly I did want him to, wanted to tell him everything about Ian and his parents and my test. Only Ian and I knew what he'd said to me the day his parents died; I hadn't been able to bring myself to say it to anyone else in case

they thought it was true. Only Larissa and I knew about my test. Nobody but me knew everything. I wanted someone else to know everything too. But that someone else couldn't be Kegan. Could it?

"I'll keep that in mind. You, um... you said you had some questions?"

He did indeed, and they were tough ones. We went through my research in painstaking detail, but I was proud of the fact that I had answers for nearly everything he asked, and knew where to find the answers I didn't have. We'd left the personal side of things behind, but we were easier with each other than we'd been before.

Just after one o'clock, one of his staff came over. "We're heading out for lunch, Kegan. Do you two want to come along?"

"I've got a better idea. Why don't I take all of you out to thank you for your hard work?"

The word spread quickly, and soon ten of us left the restaurant, headed to the Markville, one of the hottest restaurants in the neighborhood.

Kegan made sure I was sitting next to him, telling his site manager with a laugh that he needed to make use of all his time with me since Lou was charging him a fortune.

I was about to defend Lou and his rush-job pricing when Kegan looked at me and said quietly, "You're worth it, though." His tone told me that the words were meant for me, but I forced myself to take it as him saying that the company was worth it. I didn't want or need compliments from Kegan.

He took forever to choose what he'd have for lunch, analyzing the menu with many comments about how he was going to do things differently. Finally he picked something and set the menu aside.

"While we're waiting to order, why don't you guys let me know how things are coming along? If anything's important for Lou to know, Candy will keep track of it. Okay, Jason, how're we doing?"

The site manager said, "Really well. The main area's demolition is nearly finished, and we'll be starting on the bathrooms later this week. We should be

just fine."

"Excellent," Kegan said, and turned to the next person. About halfway around the table, the waiter arrived and we paused so that everyone's order could be taken. Once that was out of the way, Kegan continued with his status meeting.

I sat and listened, taking occasional notes when I felt I needed to, but otherwise just listening to him and watching how he handled the meeting. He was keenly interested in every detail, no matter how small, full of ideas to make things better, and now I understood why it all mattered so much to him. I was again pierced with the desire to care that deeply about work, to be that driven to succeed, to have such a strong passion for something. Anything.

The second-last person to speak said, "Well, basically things are going very well." He paused, obviously hoping Kegan would be satisfied with that and move on.

"What isn't going well?"

The man swallowed hard. "The granite floor tiles that you wanted for the entranceway arrived yesterday, but they're the Black Pearl color instead of Blue Pearl. I called the company and they're picking them up tomorrow and replacing them with the right ones, but it'll be nearly three weeks before they arrive."

"Who made the mistake?" Kegan's voice held no emotion. I shivered suddenly; the air conditioning must have kicked in.

"I... umm..." The poor man was clearly terrified. But why? Sure, it looked like he'd made the mistake, but it was fixable, so why was the guy so scared? He drew a deep breath and said, in a rush, "I did. I accidentally ordered the item number above the one you wanted. I'm sorry, Kegan."

Everyone around the table sat absolutely still. There was silence, like the silence that comes after lightning flashes but before the thunder rolls, for what seemed like forever. I looked down at my lap, not sure what to do, and caught a glimpse of Kegan's hands under the table, clenched into tight fists. I turned to look at him. His face was utterly calm.

He brought his hands up, rested them, palm down, on the table, and said, still with no hint of emotion in his voice, "It's all right, Adam. Things go wrong. I'm

sure the new tiles will arrive on time."

Adam's face regained some of its lost color. "Thanks, Kegan. I'll make sure they do."

"Good," Kegan said, turning to the next person. I wondered if I'd imagined the tension and the stress around the table. I didn't think so, because the rest of the staff looked nearly as relieved as Adam.

I half-expected Kegan to ask me out to dinner again, but he didn't, just saying a friendly goodbye and wishing me a nice weekend. I wouldn't have been able to go anyhow, since I'd agreed to meet Tasha after work for some sort of secret shopping expedition. She'd refused to say what we'd be doing, and I was intrigued in spite of my fatigue.

Sometimes one member of a friendship is totally pulled together and has everything under control, and the other member always gives off the air of someone running desperately to catch a bus, even when she's just standing still. With Tasha, I wasn't the 'running for the bus girl', a rare occurrence in my life.

She looked her usual self: hair swept up in an unruly ponytail, a solid inch of dark roots showing at the base of the blonde, lipstick a bit crooked, one earring just barely hanging on.

We hugged, and I fixed her earring, and then we headed into the subway.

"So, where are we off to?" I asked, just making conversation.

She shushed me as though we were spies and I'd almost given away the mission. "It's embarrassing," she hissed at me.

"I know, you said that before. But I still want to know."

"Oh, all right, lean over here."

So I did, and she whispered something in my ear that sounded like, "I'm going to get my wood pierced."

"Your wood?"

"What? No, c'mere again."

This time, I distinctly heard, "hood".

"What's a hood?"

"You know, your....errr..."

Tasha accompanied this rather unenlightening statement with a vague wave toward her lower half. I raised my eyebrows in the universal 'I have no clue' formation, and she repeated the gesture.

"Sorry, Tasha, I don't get it. Just tell me."

So she did. And I nearly died.

Tasha, who I'd always thought was relatively normal, was planning to get a hole punched through the tiny piece of skin covering her most sensitive 'girly' bit. And then have jewelry pushed through the hole.

"Will you get it done with me?"

I tapped my ear, pretending I'd gone temporarily deaf. "I'm sorry, I thought you asked if I'd get it done with you. That can't be what you said, because that would mean that you're insane, and I'd hate to have to have you committed. All that paper work, you know."

Tasha pouted. "I went with you when you had your..." She repeated her vague lower body gesture, aiming it at me this time.

"When I had the wart on my foot removed? You can't be serious. This is totally not the same thing, and anyhow, you didn't get your wart removed, you just came with me. I'll come along, but there's no way I'm letting some guy--"

"It's a girl."

"Pardon?"

"My piercer. She's a girl."

Tasha really seemed to think this would change my mind. So deluded.

"Why would it be better to have a girl piercer?"

"I don't want to have a guy looking at me like that."

"And you'd be more comfortable if a girl did?"

"Well..."

We continued to bicker, in our comfortably familiar way, until the subway reached our station. We exited the train, made the usual 'it smells like refried garbage in here' faces at each other, and climbed the stairs to the street. Tasha became more and more quiet as we walked. When we arrived at the door of the piercing place, she turned to me with an expression of pure terror.

"I can't do it!"

"You don't have to."

"But I want to. But I can't. But I want to get it done. Really, I do."

"Who're you trying to convince, me or you? If you want to, let's go in. If not, let's go shopping. Totally up to you. After all, you're the one who wants to get a hole punched in your--"

"Don't!" Tasha moaned, then she marched into the shop. I followed.

The main room was brightly lit and smelled of disinfectant, its walls covered with pictures and drawings of tattoos and piercings. I stared at them as Tasha took herself off to the counter. A woman in her mid-twenties bearing an incredible number of piercings and at least five tattoos smiled at her as she approached.

Tasha leaned in and whispered something to her. She smiled reassuringly and yelled into the back room, "Hood piercing!" Tasha closed her eyes in mortification as every head in the place swiveled to check her out.

A beautiful coffee-skinned woman came out of the back area. She shook hands with Tasha and began to lead her into the back room, but Tasha asked, with a slight hint of desperation in her voice, "Can my friend come too?"

Uh, no, thank you.

"I'm afraid not," said the woman. "There's just room enough for you and me back there."

Whew. I threw Tasha an apologetic smile and watched her head off to her date with a very sharp needle.

I spent the next few minutes checking out the tattoo drawings and photographs. Some of them were pretty freaky, but some were absolutely gorgeous. A band around a girl's upper arm, shaded to look like flames. A small cat, created out of a few lines so that my eyes had to fill in the picture instead of having it all right there. A bracelet of twisting lines with a star in the center, done in rich shades of purple, blue, and green.

"Interested in a tattoo?"

I jumped and turned to the woman at the counter. "Oh, no, I'm just waiting for my friend."

She grinned. "That's how I got my first one. Once you start, you can't stop."

"Like potato chips."

"You got it. If you have any questions, let me know."

I smiled and returned to the designs. I'd never considered getting anything other than my ears pierced, but the thought of a tattoo had always been intriguing. But then again, tattoos, in my limited experience, were found on people who were vibrant themselves. I probably wasn't the kind of person to get one.

A gorgeous wolf tattoo, so realistic each strand of its fur was clearly drawn, caught my eye. I stared at it for a minute, then went to the counter. "Could you do a polar bear as a tattoo?"

She smiled. "We can do anything. There's probably a bear or two in our flash book." She dragged a huge binder out from under the counter and flipped through it. "Here we go."

She turned the binder toward me, and we looked at the bears together. Most were

either more like cartoons or like some strange nightmare with vicious claws and fangs, and the few that were okay just didn't grab me somehow.

"Thanks anyhow."

"Don't give up yet. We can always do a custom design, and there might be more in here too," she said, turning the page.

And there it was. A polar bear, staring up at a full moon, standing on the edge of an ice floe. The bear was done with soft strokes around its outline, so that it appeared sort of furry, and the water somehow looked both welcoming and frozen. The bear of my dreams.

I touched the bear with a fingertip, and looked up at her. She grinned at me. "I've seen *that* look before. When will you get it done?"

I smiled back. "I won't. I'm not the tattoo type."

"There's no such thing. If you love it, you're the type."

I looked down at the bear. "How much would it cost?"

"It'd be about one fifty. It'd be perfect on your lower back."

I nodded. "I'd want a star instead of the moon, though."

"Not a problem," she said, flipping through the binder again and showing me pictures of more stars than I could ever need. I spotted the perfect one almost immediately.

"Thanks," I said, turning to leave the counter.

"Take our card," she said, passing it across to me. "Just in case you decide to do it."

I pocketed the card and smiled at her, then returned to staring at the art on the walls.

One hundred and fifty dollars. Not a bad price for something that'd last forever. But could I really get a tattoo? What would Ian say? What if I couldn't handle

the pain? I really didn't want to go through life with a polar bear nose tattooed on my back because I didn't have the guts to get the rest of the thing done.

My reverie was interrupted by Tasha's arrival. She paid the counter woman then came over to me. She seemed to be walking reasonably well.

"How was it?" I asked.

"Hurt like a bitch," Tasha said succinctly.

"Oh."

"But as soon as she put the jewelry in, it was fine," she continued. "And it doesn't really hurt at all now."

"Well, congrats, I guess."

We left the shop and headed off for dinner.

"Tasha?"

"Hmmm?"

"Do you think I'm the tattoo type?"

"Nope."

"Geez, think about it a bit first, would you?"

"Okay."

Tasha stared at me for about two seconds, and then said, "Definitely not."

"Why?"

"'Cause you're just not."

Am too. I think.

By the time I got home, I felt like I'd gained a thousand pounds since the

morning, so tired and sluggish I could barely get up the front stairs. I tossed some food into Ninja's bowl and collapsed into the fetal position on the couch.

I needed a good project to finish right now, something worthwhile, something to distract me and take my mind off everything. As I headed into the kitchen for a drink of water, it hit me.

On a whim I'd bought faux-brick wallpaper for the kitchen. I'd had it hidden under the bed for ages and had never gotten around to hanging it up. I'd also never gotten around to asking Ian how he felt about brick walls. He seemed to like the kitchen wall at my parents' house, which was made of real brick, so I was sure he'd like it.

Feeling a burst of energy, I pulled out the wallpaper rolls from where I'd stashed them under the bed. Cleaning off the dust bunnies, more the size of dust gorillas, I opened up the plastic wrapping and sat down to read the instructions. It didn't sound that difficult. I had to cut the wallpaper to the right length, roll it pattern-side-in, soak it in water, pull it out, fold it together, let it sit, and slap it on the wall. No worries.

I wanted to paper the wall behind the fridge and the microwave, so both needed to be moved. The fridge pulled out fairly easily, leaving behind a patch of floor that made it quite clear where hairballs and bugs and cat toys went to die. The microwave, on the other hand, was on a stand that was apparently quite happy where it was. It refused to move until I took everything off it, and even then it was a tough job.

I filled the bathtub with lukewarm water and soaked the first piece of paper for thirty seconds, then carried it down the stairs and into the kitchen. The wallpaper seemed to really like me, to be quite attached to me. Literally, since it kept peeling itself from the wall and settling delicately onto my head.

I was wearing enough wallpaper paste that I could probably have hung myself on the wall when the paper finally made its first attempt to cling to the wall. It did, however, continue to slide gently downward whenever I let go, so I was reduced to holding the entire sheet on the wall, trying not to move a muscle, to allow it to make a bond with the kitchen wall.

I was terrified to release the paper, in case I'd have to start the whole dreadful process again from the beginning, so I stood for fifteen minutes before I finally

managed to muster up the nerve to lift my hands away. I stared, holding my breath... and the paper did not slide. Nor did it drape itself about my head and shoulders like a faux-brick shawl.

I was elated.

Until I remembered that there were three more (plus a bit) strips of wallpaper waiting to be hung.

As it turned out, the other strips were actually a bit more cooperative, and the rest of the wall was finished in just over an hour. I drained the bathtub, wiped up the wallpaper paste that seemed to be dribbled throughout the house and collapsed onto the couch, from which I had a great view of my new wall.

Gorgeous. Simply gorgeous. I was so proud of myself. The wall looked incredibly realistic, the paper hadn't come down and I'd done it all myself.

Absolutely awesome.

Damn, I hoped Ian would like it.

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacat rocks@hotmail.com

Subject: Hypothetical question

Do you like bricks?

I went out with Tasha after work tonight. She got something pierced. I can't tell you what, but if she offers to show it to you, you're both in big trouble! Do you think I'm the tattoo type?

I'm glad to hear you're settling in. Phoning me at nine my time on Sunday should be fine. I'm having dinner with my parents but I'll make sure I'm home by nine.

Have a good day. :)

Me

Before I sent off the email, I read it over a few times. I'd never really had an

answer from Ian about whether he 'forgave' me for working with Kegan. I thought about pushing the issue, but decided against it. That wasn't how Ian and I operated.

Not any more, at least. At the beginning we'd been able to tell each other anything, but now we were far better at shoving problems under the rug than we were at examining them. And being thousands of kilometers apart wasn't likely to improve our examining skills.

Email sent, I headed off to bed. Again, I hadn't spent any time thinking about my marriage, and Ian would be calling me on Sunday. Not that I'd planned to say anything about any decisions I might have made, but I'd expected to be at least a little closer to knowing what I wanted out of life and love by then. Tomorrow. Definitely.

My last thought before I fell asleep was of the tear on Kegan's cheek and how badly I'd wanted to hug him.

Saturday, August 6th

I woke up hungry. Starving, really. Must have been all the calories I burned off hanging the wallpaper. I stuffed in a quick banana and headed to the gym. I was doing so well with going every day, and I didn't want to break the tradition. Besides, my muscles weren't *that* sore.

I was on my elliptical machine, and doing quite well, when I got the idea to try to lift some weights. Using the machine's poles for support, I looked around the gym and saw two possibilities. There were the loose weights, in an area populated by large sweaty men who were grunting so loudly I could hear them over my MP3 player. At the other side of the gym, a small group of women in perfectly coordinated outfits were using machines that would ensure they didn't end up swinging the weights everywhere.

I opted to be a fashion victim instead of a grunter.

After a few more minutes of elliptical work, I climbed off and headed for the weight machines. They were arranged in a circle, and everyone shuffled one machine to the left after a minute or two. I found an open machine, set the weight to what looked like a reasonable level, and gave its instructions a quick

read. It seemed easy enough, so I settled myself on the seat facing the machine, grabbed the handles, and pulled out and backwards.

Absolutely nothing happened.

I stood up partway and skimmed the instructions again. I'd been doing it right. I tried again. Still nothing. I lowered the weight a notch and gave another effort. This time the weights lifted about an inch but I couldn't move them any further.

I set the machine to not add any weight at all. I managed to complete the movement eight times and then my arms started to shake and I couldn't do it again. I rested for a few seconds, and did five more before the little old lady to my right moved over and said, "Off you go, love." I went to the next machine as she increased the weight on the back fly to more than I'd started with.

I went around the entire circuit that way, lowering the weight on each machine to zero. A few times it was actually too light, but I decided to treat those machines as a rest instead of adding more weight.

When I was finished, my arms and legs shaking, I left the circle of machines and walked for a little on the treadmill to cool down then took a quick shower and went home hungry enough to eat Ninja.

I made myself a huge breakfast. Pancakes, scrambled eggs, and a fruit salad. Stuffed nearly rigid, I lounged on the couch watching cartoons until I began to feel a strange sensation. Very strange. What was it? I'd never felt this before, this... this urge to...

Urge to clean! I actually wanted to clean up the house. Stunning. I did usually keep the place reasonably tidy, but I didn't enjoy cleaning. I did what I had to do to keep me and Ian and Ninja alive and healthy, and I'd never had more enthusiasm for the process than that.

Since it had never happened before, the odds of it re-occurring seemed slight, so I set to work with gusto. By two o'clock I'd cleaned the whole house and done four of my "I should really do this someday" most-hated tasks (and now had a perfectly organized kitchen, bathroom floors I could have eaten off if I'd been into that sort of thing, spotless windows and mirrors, and absolutely nothing under my bed) and I was exhausted. But the house really was starting to look good.

I collapsed on the (newly fluffed) couch and let loose an enormous sigh. I was wiped out. I could sleep for hours.

No, I couldn't. I was going out for dinner and dancing at Light with Larissa and a bunch of her fellow makeup artists. I could never tell her friends apart, all slim pretty blondes with perfect makeup, but I'd been out with them before and had a lot of fun. They were hard to keep up with, though. I'd never make it through the evening without a rest.

I went upstairs to the bedroom and set my alarm clock for four-thirty, then slipped under the covers on my side of the bed and was asleep almost immediately.

The alarm jarred me awake far too soon. I shut it off and staggered to the shower. The hot water pounding down on me began to bring me back to life, and a vigorous scrubbing with a towel finished the job.

I flipped through my closet and put on a knee-length denim skirt and a cobalt blue t-shirt with a silver star on it, then found my favorite black sandals and spent a few minutes putting on some makeup. I'd never look as good as Larissa and her friends, but I figured I should at least make the effort. I put on some dangly silver star-shaped earrings and a matching necklace, pulled my hair back into a low ponytail, and waited for Larissa to arrive.

And waited.

Some people are famous for being on time. Larissa.... well, I love her, but...

Eventually, we were on our way to dinner.

Larissa had told me she'd let Angela pick the restaurant for dinner because she had the fussiest food requirements of any of us. Of any of us on the planet, probably. Most restaurants had only one thing on the menu that she could actually handle, and this one had two.

Larissa introduced me to everyone, and I did my best to remember their names. As we clinked glasses with our first cocktails of the evening, Larissa said, "So, what's new, girls? I'll start. Nothing. Candy?"

"How many times do I--"

"Sorry, Cand_ice_!"

"Well," I said, not wanting to make a huge deal about it, "My husband's away."

"For how long?" Angela picked at her salad (organic lettuce only, no dressing, one radish).

"Four weeks; well, closer to three now, I guess."

Fiona was surprised. "You let him go?"

"I didn't have a choice, it's a business trip."

"Well, but--"

"Just because you couldn't trust your boyfriend, doesn't mean--"

Fiona cut Larissa off right back. "I wasn't saying he'd cheat on her. Sheesh."

Angela stepped in. "Well, I have news, so listen for once, would you?"

And she did have news. She'd got a tattoo last week.

"But, Ang, isn't that an odd thing to do? To put all that stuff in your body?"

"Oh, please, it's no worse than getting your ears pierced."

"Which you haven't done."

"Shut up, Larissa," Kathryn said, "and let her show us."

Really cute. A delicate little tulip, sweetly mauve with spring green leaves, just above her ankle bone on the outside of her leg.

"So tell the truth. How much did it hurt?" I asked, imagining a million vaccination needles at once.

Angela smiled. "Well, think of a sunburn--"

"That's not so bad," Kathryn interrupted.

"Now," said Angela, regaining her audience, "imagine someone scratching your sunburn with a pin. That's about what it feels like."

I could handle that.

Several vodka shots later, we were dancing up a serious storm at Light. The lights were low, the dance floor was crowded, and the music was loud. Everything was perfect.

It was my turn to buy the next round of drinks, so I made my slow, careful way to the bar. Slow because the place was absolutely packed, careful because I didn't want to trip and fall. My alcohol tolerance was so low that one liquor-filled chocolate gave me a buzz, so the vodka shots had hit me pretty hard.

"Candy." The voice in my ear was so soft and low I barely heard it.

I turned to find myself face to gorgeous face with Kegan. In the dim lighting of the club he was even better looking than he'd been at his restaurant, and he'd been plenty good looking enough then. Locked in his gaze, lost in his eyes, I stared at him for what seemed like forever. And he returned the favor.

"Hi there," he said finally. "I'm glad it turned out you were here."

I smiled, not sure what to say.

"You look stunning," he said. Stunned, more likely, but it was nice of him to say it. I made the universal "oh please" face, and he said, "Not a surprise, though. You were always gorgeous."

And then, in an instant, I was furious. "Oh, really. That's not what you used to say."

"What did I--"

A little voice in my head warned, "Are you sure you want to do this? Isn't it better to pretend you've forgotten all about it?"

My alcohol-fueled anger disagreed. I moved closer to Kegan and said, "You told me you'd had a smart girl, and now you wanted a beautiful one."

"You re-- I did not."

"You did too. That's why I broke up with you."

"I always thought you were beautiful, Candy." He sounded sincere but I was still raging.

"Well, you said it. I remember. Hell, I can still hear it." Oops. That was a little more than I'd meant to reveal. Was it even true?

And did he still think I was beautiful?

He looked aghast, apologetic and disgusted with himself. "Candy, I--"

"Candice. Call me Candice."

He shook his head. "I can't do it. I always think of you as Candy." He put his hand on my shoulder and I felt my resistance begin to crumble. "I regretted it as soon as I said it, and I hoped you'd forgotten since you didn't mention it before. My only defense is that I was twenty-three and a moron. Not much of a defense, your honor, but it's all I've got. Can I at least buy you a drink to make it up to you, and to thank you for your work?"

"No, it's all right. It's my turn to buy for my friends anyhow."

"I insist. Just let me get my friends and we're all set."

And somehow Kegan ended up paying for my round. I did buy the next one, so it's not like I shafted the girls or anything. Larissa filled some of them in, with whispered conversation, on who he was, and they were well ready to hate him. But a few minutes of his effortless charm turned them around.

His friends helped too. Their eyes skimmed over me with barely a flicker of interest, but Larissa and her beautiful coworkers attracted a lot more notice. We stayed as one big group in the quietest corner we could find, but I could see furtive little glances passing between individuals, and in no time Angela was borne off to dance.

I smiled at Larissa, busy chatting with a blond guy who'd already bought her a drink. She raised her eyebrows, then shot a glance in Kegan's direction and made

an expression like she could smell something rotten before turning back to her new man.

It never ceased to amaze me how quickly she worked. Even when she had a boyfriend, she could always get men to talk to her.

I'd had boyfriends between Kegan and Ian, but because they'd decided, for some unknown reason, they wanted to be with me. I had never been the pursuer, never seen a guy and set out to make him want me. Things just seemed to happen, out of my control.

I heard a high-pitched giggle and turned to see Larissa's friend Fiona standing far too close to Kegan. He was smiling down at her and she had her head tipped to the side and was staring up into his eyes. As I watched she let her hand rest on his arm for a second before slipping it slowly away, fingers trailing along his skin.

Was Fiona a smart girl or a beautiful one?

Before I knew what I was doing, I'd gone right up to them. Kegan turned to me with a smile. Fiona turned to me with a glare.

"Anything new with the restaurant?" I said, since I needed a reason to have come over.

Kegan shook his head. "They're still trashing the place. It's hard to believe it'll ever be something good again, with the mess it's in right now." Our eyes met and he added, "You and Lou'll make sure it works out, right?"

I swallowed hard. "Of course." Even if I had to do it all myself.

Fiona said, "You have a restaurant?"

He explained, and she said, "That's so neat. I never knew anyone who owned a restaurant before. Why'd you decide to do that?"

With a shock, I realized that I didn't know why he was doing it. When we were dating, he'd just told me about it one day. If he'd given me his reasons, I didn't remember.

"When I was a kid, my parents ate out nearly every night. My mother hates to cook, and my dad can barely make toast. They'd tell me about the restaurants, how they were decorated and how fancy the food was, and it all sounded so glamorous and fun. As I got older, I started thinking about it more seriously, and by the time I was in university I knew it was what I wanted."

Fiona twisted her necklace around her finger and Kegan's eyes dropped to her carefully displayed cleavage. I hated her for being so obvious, and him for falling for it. "Will you be hiring waitresses?"

He raised his eyes to hers and smiled. "Absolutely."

"I'll give a resume to Candice," she said, smiling back at him.

Good luck with that.

"Candice, knees to sink?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Need a new drink, I said."

"Oh, sorry. No, I'm fine, thanks."

Larissa went off to the bar, taking the long way to avoid getting too close to Kegan. She hadn't said a word to him since he and his friends had joined us, barely even acknowledging his greeting. I knew she was still angry with him, but I was embarrassed by her reaction.

"Candy's always had something of a hearing problem."

"Really? I didn't know that," Angela said, looking surprised.

"I do not," I said, taking a mock swing at Kegan, which became slightly less mock due to my alcohol level.

He grabbed my hand just before I hit him in the face and gave it a brief shake, his fingers on my skin sending shivers through me. "Behave yourself," he said with a wink.

I took another swing with my other hand, and he caught that one too. Holding both my hands, he pinned my arms down at my sides, grinning at me as I giggled and tried, admittedly not very hard, to pull away.

"What about this hearing problem?" Apparently Fiona didn't like Kegan playing with me any more than I'd enjoyed seeing him talking to her.

Kegan squeezed my hands once and released me, and I made a show of rubbing my wrists in fake agony as he said to Fiona, "It's not a real one." Turning back to me, he said, "You just miss the odd word, right?"

I knew where he was going, so I gave him a half-smile and hoped he'd move on to something else. No such luck.

"The best one was the pelican story."

"Pelicans? I love pelicans," Kathryn said dreamily, drunk almost to the point of not being able to stay atop her bar stool. "They're so adorable, the way they waddle around and look like they're wearing a tux."

"That's 'penguins', kiddo," Angela said gently, and then laughed at Kathryn's obvious confusion.

"Tell us the story!" Fiona beseeched Kegan, and he, naturally, obliged. Anything for Fiona.

"Well, we were out at a bar, and of course it was loud. My buddy Anthony was complaining about crows and pigeons eating the vegetables right out of his garden. Someone suggested he could use a pellet gun."

Kegan went on with the story, and everyone laughed at the right parts. I, however, was lost in memory. I had completely not heard 'pellet gun'. What I'd heard had been 'pelican'.

I'd said, "With a pelican?" To my amazement, Anthony had said, "Yeah, with a pelican". I'd tried again, sure I was missing something. Again, I was informed that they would use a pelican to remove the crows and pigeons from Anthony's garden.

Finally, in desperation, I'd leaned over to Anthony, and said, as clearly as I

could, "Are you saying you're going to use a pel-i-can to get rid of the crows and pigeons?"

Anthony had roared with laughter, and then filled everyone else in on what I'd thought he'd said. Of course, they'd laughed too. And so had I, because it *was* funny.

Until I saw the look on Kegan's face. He was embarrassed. He was ashamed of me.

I tuned back into Kegan's story in time to hear him saying, "Anthony said, 'How the hell would I get rid of crows and pigeons with a pelican?' and we laughed and laughed. Didn't we, Candy?"

"We sure did," I said in as cheerful a tone as I could muster.

Nearly everyone was fooled, but Angela, soberer than most, eyed me suspiciously, and I wasn't surprised a few minutes later when she announced that she had to go to the bathroom and demanded that I go along "for her protection".

"What was that all about?" Angela said from the depths of a stall. "You didn't look like you enjoyed the story."

"The story was fine," I said. "It was living through it that wasn't so fun."

"I can see that it would have been a bit embarrassing. But still, it is kind of funny."

"I know. It was hilarious. But the thing is, you didn't see how he was reacting to it back then. Like I'd humiliated him or something."

"Really? That's stupid. It was just a mistake, and a cute one at that. It didn't make him look bad or anything."

"Well, I think he thought it did."

The toilet flushed, and Angela came over to the grungy sink. She made a face at its unsanitary state, but washed her hands carefully nonetheless and dried them on a paper towel, then turned to me.

"He definitely didn't seem embarrassed tonight."

No, he hadn't. I wondered why. Was it because so much time had passed? Had he stopped being so worried about how people saw him? Or was it just that before he'd felt that my behavior reflected badly on him and now he didn't?

As we were about to leave, Angela caught my arm.

"Be careful, okay? Larissa told me about him. He sounds like trouble."

Larissa had a big mouth. I said, "I won't see him outside of work, and we've got so much to do I doubt there'll be time for anything *but* work."

Angela grimaced. "I hope you're right. I have a bad feeling about him."

If it had been anyone else, I'd have brushed off the comment, but Larissa had told me about Angela and her 'feelings'. The year before, she'd gone on vacation to the Dominican Republic. As she sat in the airplane waiting for it to take off, she suddenly had a feeling that something was wrong with the plane. Her husband, naturally, wasn't willing to get off the plane, or even ask a flight attendant what was wrong, based on his wife's 'feeling', no matter how accurate she'd been in the past.

As they discussed in hushed voices what they should do, a flight attendant had made an announcement.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have found a small problem with the aircraft's landing gear. We regret that there will be a fifteen minute delay while we make the necessary repairs."

Angela was immediately calm and relaxed again.

If she felt that Kegan was bad news for me, she was most likely right.

He certainly had been in the past.

"I think he's changed," Kathryn stage-whispered into my ear. "He's nothing like Larissa said."

It certainly seemed like it.

Kegan's cell phone rang and, with an apologetic wave, he headed outside so he could hear.

Larissa looked at me with her mouth pulled to one side.

"What's with the face?"

"Just please be careful, *Candy*," she said, emphasizing the nickname that I wouldn't let her use any more but that Kegan was getting away with on a regular basis.

"I told him not to call me that," I said, trying to sound like I thought that was actually the issue.

"Candice. You're different when he's around. He's bad for you."

"I know, I know. I'll take Ian to his restaurant someday and we'll all have a good laugh. Is that okay?"

Larissa considered for a few moments, and then clearly decided she didn't want to have this particular argument right then. She laughed, threw her arms around me, and said, "More drinks? I'm buying!"

When Kegan didn't come back in ten minutes or so, his friends left to find him, but we girls stayed at the club, dancing and drinking and laughing, until three in the morning. No further sign of Kegan. Not that I was looking, of course.

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacatrocks@hotmail.com

Subject: heeyb there!

I juust got ho9me from my girlls niugt out. My ffinger s feel dru nk, :)

AAAnd i am too the tattoo type. Maybe i'll get six bfore you get home. How about a beear with faanggs?

Canndice

Sunday, August 7th

Ninja, the world's most accurate furry alarm clock, woke me up right at seven, the perfect time to get up on a work day. Unfortunately, it was Sunday. My favorite day to sleep in. Not to mention that I'd gotten home at three-thirty and was so not ready to be up yet.

As there is no snooze button on a hungry cat, I got up and fed Ninja and gave his litter box a quick tidy-up. Then I went back to bed and tried to fall asleep again. No luck.

Giving up after about twenty minutes, I staggered to the bathroom. I'd drunk far too much the night before and it was having the usual effect on both my brain and my bladder.

I reached for the toilet paper but found nothing but an empty roll. I vaguely remembered using the last few squares last night to scrape off my makeup, being out of cotton balls as well. I craned my neck to look into the cabinet beside the toilet. Not a scrap of toilet paper to be found.

I actually started to call for Ian before I remembered. I considered calling for Ninja, but I had my doubts that he would be of much assistance. I briefly entertained myself with an image of Ninja, with a roll of toilet paper tied around his neck, the way Saint Bernard dogs go out to rescue people lost in the snow, only they have alcohol around their necks. (The dogs, not the people. If the people had alcohol tied around their necks, they'd probably be much less concerned about being lost in the snow.)

What to do, what to do? I foraged in the garbage can and came up with a few sad-looking old tissues. They would have to suffice.

After a brief search, I discovered Ian had stashed our last toilet paper purchase in the cupboard in the other bathroom, so I moved most of it over to our bathroom, then went back to bed. Even though I'd had less than four hours sleep, somehow I was now wide awake. My body was exhausted, but my mind was running a mile a minute, mostly along the Kegan track.

After we broke up, I'd been devastated. I didn't go to school, take showers, or even check my email for days. I just cried. My entire self-concept had been

based on his love for me, and I was alternately horrified that I had let him become so desperately important to me and crushed that I would no longer have him in my life.

Once I'd recovered, I'd had a string of relationships that I had described frequently as "nasty, brutish and short", a Thomas Hobbes quote that was the only thing I could remember from my philosophy class. One guy in the middle might have been worth keeping, but we'd eventually just drifted apart. Then I'd met Ian, and everything had changed.

It had been one of those 'huge group of friends' outings. I'd been there with my friends, and he'd been there with his, including a guy on whom I'd had a slight crush. When I first looked at Ian, though, something shifted inside me. I tried to brush it off as the effects of far too much peach schnapps, my drink of choice in my younger days for its low price and high alcohol content, but I knew it wasn't.

I didn't even know him yet, but I knew he was the one.

We spent the whole evening together, much to the disgust of my original crush-ee (who, it turned out, had only shown up because he was interested in me). Ian and I danced every dance, whether the music was fast or slow, as a slow dance, and we talked constantly.

At the end of the night, we exchanged phone numbers and a hug that felt like it lasted forever, and I floated home. Ian called me the next day, and we'd been together ever since.

I'd been thinking about that night a lot since his parents' death. Remembering how absolutely and utterly right it felt had gone a long way toward keeping us together. Knowing that Ian was a good man helped too. He'd lashed out at me in anger and pain, and I didn't really think he'd meant it the way it had sounded, didn't think he'd meant to hurt me as much as he had.

But seeing Kegan again had thrown me for a loop, had awakened it all again. The pain he'd caused, yes, but also the passion he'd brought into my life, so different from Ian's calmer nature. Ian was my current love, and I wanted him to be my last one, but Kegan was my first. He was hard to forget.

After a little more reminiscing, I decided to get up and shower, since I was

clearly not going to be able to get back to sleep. I was meeting Larissa for our weekly 'ladies who lunch' lunch. We always wore our best and fanciest clothes, often giving a new outfit its maiden voyage, and had a fabulous girly lunch. "Sex and the City" with only two girls.

I washed my face and spread it thickly with my favorite face mask, carefully avoiding my lips. The mask smelled deliciously of chocolate mint, but I'd accidentally tasted it once and it was not an experience I cared to repeat.

Looking like a swamp monster from the neck up, I indulged in one of my favorite pastimes. I wrapped myself in a towel, grabbed one of the many books hanging around the bathroom, and settled down on the toilet lid. Many was the happy hour I'd whiled away in the bathroom throughout my life, just reading and relaxing. I couldn't relax unless I was doing something at the same time.

A strange tight feeling in my face gradually drew my attention from my book. I was still wearing the face mask. The face mask that, the instructions made quite clear, should not be left on for more than ten minutes. I glanced at the clock Ian'd hung on the wall to encourage me to get ready quickly.

Thirty-five minutes?

My swamp-monster look had turned into an old mummy, all dried and flaking dirt, and my skin was starting to hurt. I clambered into the shower and turned the water on to a nicely hot level.

The mask came off easily, but I could feel my skin was irritated. This wasn't going to be pretty. I'd look like a beet. A sunburned beet.

I quickly finished up my shower ablutions, and climbed back out to face my face. Actually, not too bad. Certainly redder than I'd hoped but not as bad as it could have been. I dried off, pulled my hair into a ponytail, found some clothes that might pass Larissa's inspection, and gave Ninja a hug goodbye.

I'd spent ages trying to pick the perfect car for me, and then I spotted the Tiburon and it was love at first sight. My beautiful black car (license plate NINJACAT, a birthday present from Ian) had served me very well, and I enjoyed feeling like I was driving a sports car. Since I rarely drove faster than the speed limit, I really didn't need a sports car, but it was fun to feel like I had one.

Larissa and I were meeting at the Setherwood Café. I arrived five minutes late, and Larissa, naturally, had not yet arrived. I had learned from past experience. I pulled my emergency book from my purse and sat down on the curb outside the restaurant to wait for her. Thirty minutes later, she arrived.

"Right on time!" I said, rolling my eyes.

"Well, get up, get up," Larissa said, feigning impatience.

I did, and we strolled inside and up to the scarily perfect-looking girl at the desk. Like a Barbie come to life. Only with bigger breasts and a smaller waist.

"Candice, Candice, Candice..." she murmured, running an incredibly long metallic green fingernail down the list. "Ah, yes, here you are... you *are* a few minutes early, though."

She looked up at me as though I had broken wind, started a food fight, or ordered red wine with chicken.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," I said, trying to sound sorry. "We can wait."

"Yes," she replied, and turned away to berate a hapless waiter who had wandered by with... horrors... two wine glasses on his tray. Apparently this was the height of inelegance.

"What time did you make the reservation for?" Larissa asked.

"I... 12:45."

Larissa laughed. We had arranged to meet at noon. "You're on to me. Curses. I shall have to find a new way to foil your plans."

"Foil my leftovers."

"Foil your plastic wrap."

"That doesn't even make sense."

"Yeah, well, neither do you."

We laughed, loudly for a moment then more quietly as scary Barbie girl's eyes

raked us, and found ourselves two rather uncomfortable bar stools and ordered drinks. Naturally, as soon as they arrived our table was ready. We carried our drinks, a Fuzzy Navel for Larissa and a Killer Koolaid for me, to our table and settled down in some equally uncomfortable but highly stylish chairs.

"So...." Larissa dragged the word out to incredible lengths.

"Yes?"

"So, Kegan."

"Yes?"

"Oh, give it up, chickie. That was so weird, running into-- wait, did you know he was going to be there?"

I shook my head. "How could I have known?"

"You *are* working with him, right?"

"Well, yeah. And I told him we go there. But no, I had no idea."

Larissa looked at me searchingly. "How do you feel?"

"Honestly? Kind of messed up. I wish I'd had some warning or something. It's bad enough seeing him at work."

"Well, yeah... but hey, at least you looked great."

"Did I?"

Larissa sighed with the deep sadness of someone who spent most of her life telling me I wasn't hideous. "You did. I'm sure he was crushed. Bird that got away and all that."

For as long as I'd known her, Larissa had never correctly delivered a saying or quotation. I was pondering what poor proverb had just been twisted beyond all recognition when our waiter arrived to see what "the lovely ladies would like to eat".

We both ordered beef barley soup and small salads. This was not because we

were trying to lose weight. Far from it. We were both planning to get two desserts, and we didn't want to fill up on the main course. Ordering finished, Larissa, like a fat kid on a free chocolate bar, returned to her favorite topic.

"Are you really going to go check out Kegan's restaurant after it opens?"

"I don't know. I'd have to see what Ian thinks, I guess."

Larissa shook her head. She put on the fake high-pitched voice that she always used when she was pretending she was me. "Oh, Ian, let's go to Kegan's restaurant. You remember Kegan, the one who left me a total basket case who couldn't even accept a compliment without getting all freaked out? Yeah, that's the one. Let's go spend a few hours with him."

"I didn't come here to be insulted," I said, knowing I was setting her up for one of her favorite responses and not minding.

We chorused together, "Where do you usually go?" and then broke down laughing.

Larissa recovered first. "Seriously, though, I don't think seeing him any more than you have to is a good plan. What will it prove?"

"I'm not really trying to prove anything. But couldn't we be friends?"

Larissa widened her eyes. "Friends. With him? Uh, no. No, you couldn't be. 'Cause he's a jerk. He's self-centered and arrogant."

"Maybe he's changed," I said, thinking of George and Kegan's drive to honor him, and wishing I could tell Larissa. I couldn't, though; it wasn't my story to tell, and she'd never believe he'd meant it and I didn't want to hear her mock him.

She snorted. "No way. You know it, I know it, that ridiculous cat of yours knows it. People don't change unless they want to. He won't have changed, because he thought he was perfect. So why would he change?"

Why indeed. Maybe I could ask him when I saw him next.

"Let's not talk about him any more. Let's talk about me."

I laughed. "What about you?"

"I need a favor."

"Okay."

"What are you doing tomorrow around five?"

"Not much. Leaving work, I guess. Why?"

Larissa needed me to come to the makeup studio to help her do her annual reorganization. Naturally, she had tons of makeup, and she often ended up buying multiples of various things. She liked to go through it all yearly and get it cleaned up, then take an inventory so she knew what she had.

"Sure, if you think I can handle it this time."

"Oh, yeah. It was probably my fault anyhow. I should have told you that alphabetizing it would make it harder to find."

"So this time I'll just group them by type of thing, eyeliner, lipstick, whatever?"

Larissa smiled at me. "Actually, this time I think you'll just do the counting after I group them for you."

"Good enough."

At ten minutes to nine, I was sitting beside the phone, my new yarn lying untouched in my lap, my nerves on edge. Dinner with my mother often had that effect on me. She didn't like Ian, and she didn't mind showing it. She didn't think he was good enough for me.

She'd never come right out and said it, not in those words. She must have realized that I would have to fight back then, even if only to defend myself against the suggestion that I'd made a bad choice. No, she just danced around it whenever he wasn't in earshot.

"It's a shame poor Ian never got to go to university."

"It must be nice for Ian that you make so much money." As if. Ian made much more than I did, but he and I had agreed early in our marriage never to discuss finances with our parents.

I hated it, but I'd never figured out how to stop her. To his face, she was scrupulously polite but cool, as if addressing an inferior. He knew how she felt about him, but before his parents' deaths it hadn't mattered to either of us. After, it didn't matter either, but in a different way. I wondered sometimes if he wished my parents had died instead of his, but it was yet another thing I couldn't discuss with him.

She'd spent the better part of dinner worrying about him, theoretically, although really just pointing out all the things he might not have planned for. "I hope he's got warm enough clothes. Doesn't it get cold at night? And lots of sunscreen. Do they get that terrible Montezuma's revenge there? What about malaria?" Didn't exactly make for a relaxing meal.

My tension had reached a breaking point by ten minutes after nine, and when the phone finally rang I actually gave a little scream before pulling myself together. The crackly connection made it hard to hear him, and we had to repeat ourselves a lot, but it was good to hear his voice anyhow, even though he sounded strained and awkward. Must have been the phone line.

"Things okay there?"

"Pretty good," I said. "Ninja's taking care of me."

"Good boy."

A brief silence, then we both said, "Hello?" at once.

"Sorry," he said, "thought I'd lost you."

"I'm right where you left me," I said. "Well, sort of. You left me at the airport and of course I'm--"

"What? I can't hear you."

"Never mind," I said, nearly yelling into the phone. "Tell me what's happening there. Tell me everything."

"We've almost finished the first house, and we start the walls for the school today."

And he went silent.

"What about the people? Are they nice?"

"Yeah," he said. "I was stupid and got a really bad sunburn two days ago, and they're all doing everything they can to give me the jobs out of the sun until I get better."

"You didn't tell me about that," I said. "How bad is it?"

"The blisters are pretty gross, but--"

"Blisters?" I didn't know sunburns could blister. "Did a doctor check it out?"

"Yeah. I'll be fine."

I didn't know what I'd expected from our phone call, but this banal exchange wasn't it. We could have done this over email, and I wished we had. Ian and I had loved talking to each other in the past, had never run out of topics, but recently we'd been more distant and careful to avoid anything that might have led to painful discussion. Even that would have been preferable to this phone call. We sounded like strangers, casual acquaintances at best.

Suddenly I couldn't bear it any more. "I should probably let you go," I said. "What time is it there?"

"Just after eight in the morning. And I kind of do have to get going. We've got a lot of stuff to do."

"Okay," I said. "I love you."

"Me too."

"Say it." The words burst from me. I needed to hear it, needed to know we at least still had that much, that we could say it to each other.

"Candice, I have to go. There are other people here who need the phone."

And you have time to say all that but not time to tell me you love me? "Bye, then."

"Bye."

I hung up the phone and scooped Ninja into my arms. He muttered at my disturbing his sleep, but snuggled into my shoulder and was soon snoring again. I stroked his fur and took deep breaths.

I shouldn't have offered to let him end the call. He'd think I didn't want to talk to him, and I did. Didn't I? We should have been chattering about everything that had happened since he'd been gone, but a lot of what had happened, on my side, involved Kegan and I didn't think Ian would want to hear about that.

Settling Ninja back onto the couch, I ignored his renewed grumbling and picked up my yarn, beginning to create the shawl. I kept my eyes and my mind on the yarn, not wanting to make any mistakes. When Ian got home, I wanted to show him the beauty I'd created from his present.

The formality of our phone call sapped some of the joy from the crocheting, though, and I soon set it down again. I missed us, the way we'd been, and I wanted to get back to it. Ian had never said he saw anything wrong with our relationship, but I did.

What I really wanted was to turn back time and somehow stop Ian's parents from driving that day. If I could only do that, my marriage would be just as good as it had been before.

I didn't see any other way to fix it.

Monday, August 8th

When the alarm went off, I was ready to get up and go to the gym. I'd slept fitfully, having one of those nights where it seems like you didn't sleep at all though you know you must have, and even exercising was preferable to tossing and turning any longer.

The gym was quite busy, but the treadmill gods must have been smiling on me as I found a free one easily. After a brisk twenty minute walk, I moved on to an

elliptical machine. I plugged away at it for about ten minutes, and then wrapped up with fifteen minutes of weight lifting and a lovely soak in the whirlpool.

I'd always thought the whole 'runner's high' thing was a big crock, a conspiracy designed to make everyone want to exercise, but I felt it for the first time on the elliptical. I felt strong and loose and powerful and like I could go for hours. It almost made me want to see just how long I could last.

Almost.

As I walked to Kegan's restaurant, it hit me: sometime this week I would find out whether I had cancer. I'd generally been doing well at keeping it out of my mind, but every so often it stole in there and disrupted my thoughts.

What would I do? I'd have to tell Ian, of course, and he'd probably have to come home, although I didn't know when we'd start treatments. The thought of the treatments and all that sent shivers down my spine. I didn't exactly know how cervical cancer was treated, but I was pretty sure I wouldn't enjoy it. Pap tests were uncomfortable and embarrassing enough, but this? How much would it hurt? What if it didn't work? What if--

My knees nearly gave way at the thought, and I dragged my mind away from the possibility I wouldn't make it through. I couldn't think about that. I'd think about work instead. Much safer.

Thinking of Kegan and how different working with him was from what I'd expected took me the rest of the way to his restaurant. He'd recognized right away something was bothering me; not even my mother had picked up on that. He'd let me see his emotion at finally making it happen, finally going after his goal, and I knew he'd be successful. Steel would be exactly what he wanted.

My father had always told me I could get whatever I wanted out of life if I tried hard enough. What he hadn't told me was how to decide what I wanted.

I spent the day at Steel helping Kegan choose china and cutlery patterns and selecting from a huge catalogue of crystal. We were professional throughout, but more relaxed with each other than we'd been the week before, laughing and joking even as we worked. Running into him on the weekend had been good for

us.

I'd told him about doing the inventory for Larissa that evening, and when five o'clock arrived he insisted on driving me to her studio. I told him I could get there on my own, but he had an appointment just down the road from her place and would not take my 'no' for an answer.

We walked together to his car, as sleek and polished as his restaurant was shaping up to be, and he opened the door for me. I settled myself, breathing in the mingled scents of new car, leather, and Kegan's cologne, and he closed my door before going around to his side. Ian had never done that for me. I liked it.

"So," Kegan said, starting the car and pulling out of the parking lot. The smoothness of the ride and the lack of road noise made me feel like we weren't moving at all even though I could see we were.

"So," I agreed.

"How're you doing without your husband? What's his name again?"

"Ian," I said, wishing I didn't have to. I didn't want both of them in the car with me. "And I'm doing fine."

"Not lonely?" His voice was neutral, and I responded in kind.

"No, I'm okay, it's only for a month."

"Good stuff."

We rode in silence for a few minutes. He turned on the radio, and slow sexy jazz filled the car.

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

He flicked a glance at me then returned his attention to the road. "Why do you ask?"

I had no idea. The question had come out before I'd realized it was on its way. "Um... Angela wondered," I said, throwing out a name at random.

He raised an eyebrow. "Didn't she say she was married?"

"She is. I... she wondered for a friend of hers."

Why couldn't I just shut up?

"Tell Angela I'm single and looking."

At the word 'looking', I had a flash of something I didn't want to examine too closely. Since he seemed open to questioning, I went on. "Were you ever married?"

"Nobody would have me," he said, eyes fixed on the road.

I would have. "Did you ever ask anyone?"

He pulled the car to a stop outside Larissa's studio. "Yes. She said no."

I was swept by a sudden furious jealousy that stunned me with its power. Kegan turned to me. "Guess I asked the wrong girl."

He leaned toward me. "You would have said yes, wouldn't you." It wasn't a question. He knew the answer as well as I did.

I walked into Larissa's studio to find the place in chaos. Apparently a cover photo shoot for a hugely important magazine, so important that nobody would even say its name out loud, just calling it "the magazine" as if there were only one possibility, had been scheduled for next Monday, but the fashion director had arrived half an hour before I had, insisting that the shoot was that day.

The fact that the model wasn't present, since she knew the shoot was next Monday, didn't faze him. He glanced at me as I walked in then turned to Larissa's boss again. "Look, get this thing going within the hour or I'll get myself a new studio."

Larissa greeted me with, "You look like you've seen a ghost. Are you okay?", ushering me into her tiny storage room without waiting for my answer. "All the stuff's here," she said, gesturing at the mounds of makeup, "so you just go ahead. Get a drink if you want one. I'll be back when I can. I hate dealing with all this

stupid stuff."

"Won't you have to when you get your own studio?"

"Yes, and this part will suck, but at least people will know who I am."

And she was gone. I put down my purse and got myself a bottle of water from the fridge just outside the door. Why was Larissa trying so hard to start her own business and get to a position she was going to hate? Would having everyone know her name be worth the stress?

The girl he'd asked, the one who'd said no. What had she been like? Why had he wanted to marry her and not--

That way lies madness, Candice. Get to work before Larissa comes back and you've done nothing.

Excellent advice. Forcing Kegan out of my mind yet again, I set to work dividing the makeup into categories, frequently getting lost in semantics. Should liquid eye liners be counted together with the pencil ones? Did colored mascaras go with the black ones? Was Pink Sparkle nail polish the same as Sparkle Pink?

Despite these pressing concerns, things went well for about half an hour. I had the makeup divided in a way that made sense to me and had started counting each category and making notes on the paper Larissa'd left for me. Then I started paying a little more attention to the products in each category.

A glittery eye liner in a rich purple that matched my skirt was the first to catch my eye. I studied it for a moment then ran it lightly across my left eyelid, leaving a sparkly line behind. My right eye looked sad and dull by comparison, so I quickly dressed it up as well.

Naturally, my cheeks now looked too pale, so I kept my eyes open for the perfect blusher. When it appeared, I stroked it gently over both cheeks. This of course left my mouth seeming far too naked, so I chose a stunning sparkling pink lipstick and slicked it on.

This makeup thing wasn't as scary as I'd thought. I'd only ever worn lip gloss, lipstick on very rare occasion, and mascara, but this was actually a lot of fun. I was just contemplating giving myself a beauty mark with one of the many brown

eye liner pencils when Larissa rushed in.

"We need you!"

I stared up at her. She was clearly taken aback by my impromptu makeover, but carried on regardless. "The model's on her way, but now he's demanding that we take a test shot to see how the set looks. Your hair and eyes are basically the same color as the model's, so he says you have to come in."

"Me? That makes no sense--"

"At this point I don't care. We're about a minute from losing this client, and he pays us a fortune. Let's go."

"Can't I wash--"

Larissa grabbed my hand and dragged me out of the room.

At home, I washed my face thoroughly, made myself a cup of tea, and tried not to picture the incredulous look on the client's face when I arrived, glittering like a disco ball, for the test shot.

At least he'd liked the set, and had grudgingly agreed to stick with Larissa's agency. I'd scuttled back to Larissa's studio and finished the makeup inventory with her assistance. I'd wanted to take the makeup off right away, but she'd said I looked cute, "like a four-year-old playing with her mommy's lipsticks", and had refused to let me.

After scraping the worst of the makeup off my face and applying some that actually made me look like an adult, Larissa took me out to dinner to celebrate the completion of the inventory and the keeping of the client. I had high hopes that she'd be so distracted by her busy day that she wouldn't remember my shocked appearance when I'd arrived, and for a while it seemed to be working.

She told me all about the client's insanity, and I encouraged her as much as I could. When she'd exhausted that topic, I told her about Tasha's piercing and the polar bear I'd seen there, and we joked about the possibility of my getting tattooed.

"Does Ian like tattoos?"

I shrugged. "He's never said."

"Probably. Makes you look dangerous."

"A furry polar bear makes you look dangerous?"

"Make it have bloody fangs and stuff."

"Yuck."

Eventually, though, she ran out of steam for teasing me. "So, how was your day? You looked upset when you arrived."

"Um, fine. Just worried about the test," I said. "This waiting thing stinks."

She grimaced. "Still haven't heard, huh?"

"Nope. Should be by the end of this week."

"Make sure you call me as soon as you hear, okay?"

I nodded, and she said, "Geez, I forgot," and rolled her eyes. "You're not going to believe this. Fiona wants that jerk's phone number."

"Kegan?"

She nodded. "I told her it was insane, but she insists." Larissa pulled a neatly folded paper napkin from her purse and handed it over. "This is hers. Do you have his on you?"

I shook my head as I tucked the napkin into my purse, and sick shame flooded me. I'd lied to my best friend. She didn't know, but I did, and I couldn't do it. As if I'd just remembered, I added, "Well, I do, actually, in my phone, but I'd want to ask him if he's okay with it first."

Larissa frowned, staring at me for a long moment before apparently deciding that my condition was reasonable. "Good enough. Give him hers, and you can send me a message with his tomorrow. Fiona can't stop talking about him. She'll be crushed if he has a girlfriend already."

"He doesn't."

Larissa froze mid-sip of her drink. She set the glass down and raised her eyebrows. "How do you know that?"

"It came up in conversation." Not a lie. It *had* come up. I'd brought it up, but it had still come up.

She rested her elbow on the table and dropped her chin down onto her hand, studying me with an intensity that made me squirm. "How much time are you spending with him?"

I sighed. "Lou made me the main contact, so pretty much all day every day."

"He did? Why didn't you say no?"

"I couldn't. Lou's just swamped. He really needed the help."

"Yeah, but why Kegan? Couldn't you have been the contact for some other client?"

Sure, if one of them had requested me. "Lou knows we know each other, so I guess he thought we'd work well together."

"And are you? Isn't it weird working with him?"

"Well, yeah, but better that than telling Lou I dated him."

"I suppose," she said. "It's going okay though?"

I nodded. "He really knows what he wants, so it's coming along fast. And other than Saturday night we haven't seen each other at all outside of work, so--"

"I hope not," she said. "Why would you do something like that? It'd be suicide."

Indeed.

After dinner, she dropped me off at home, but it was way too early to go to bed. I had a vague urge to spend money, so I went out and blew the evening and nearly one hundred and fifty dollars at my favorite bookstore.

I bought a chocolate chip latte on the way out and went home to read and caffeinate myself. Unfortunately, I drank the whole thing in the car, and by the time I got home I was so hyper I needed to go for a walk to burn off the excess energy.

Maybe that's the secret, I thought. Drink coffee constantly and I'd be so twitchy I'd lose tons of weight.

Or I'd jitter myself to death.

Six of one, two dozen of the other, as I accidentally said once in front of Larissa. She'd never let me forget it.

Back on the couch after my walk, I rifled through all my new books but none of them felt interesting. Instead, my attention was drawn to our wedding photos mounted on the wall near the bookshelves, to Ian's smiling face.

Suddenly, I was in tears.

Why was I thinking about Kegan, about seeing him outside of work? He was dangerous. We'd been good together before, and I was alone and vulnerable and he was too much to resist. I felt like a heroine in one of those cheesy old romance novels the library always sold for fifty cents. Minus the heaving bosom, of course.

But still. Kegan was bad for me. I wasn't going to think about him any more. I would throw myself on Lou's mercy and try to get out of being the contact. When I saw Kegan at work, I'd be cool and professional, but that would be it. In a few weeks it would all be over and my life would go back to normal.

I got up and put our wedding video into the VCR. I watched the whole thing, working on my new shawl but taking frequent breaks at the most interesting parts of the video, laughing and crying as the memories flooded back. Ian's parents had made their delight very clear, my dad had slapped Ian on the back and welcomed him to the family, and Larissa had cried making her maid of honor speech, which had naturally made me cry as well. My mother hadn't been thrilled, of course, but she had been nice enough to keep it to herself, and I remembered the day as full of laughter and love and happy tears.

It couldn't all be gone. It wasn't even two years ago, so how could it be gone? I

had to believe Ian and I still had what we'd had then. I'd been overwhelmed by love for him that day, and for months afterward, and even though I didn't feel it the same way now I knew I still loved him. He was perfect for me. I had to figure out how to bring us back together, how to rekindle the emotional side of our marriage.

I finished the video, sent an email to Ian, and went to bed. It was still early, but I had to be ready for tomorrow. Back to work. Professional. Calm. Rational. No jealousy. No emotion.

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacatocks@hotmail.com

Subject: I miss you

Just that, I guess. I miss you. I was hoping I'd have an email from you but I guess you didn't have time today.

I know you said before you didn't need counseling after Christmas Eve, but would you consider going with me? I want us back where we used to be and I don't know how to do it.

I hope your sunburn's getting better.

C

Tuesday, August 9th

I had trouble getting out of bed. Another night of restless sleep left me feeling stiff and achy and like the world's gravity had somehow been turned up overnight. My desire for a long, hot shower was nearly overwhelming.

And I would have one. But first, a gym visit. Even though I was feeling pretty rough, the thought of yesterday's lovely endorphins drew me back again.

I repeated the workout exactly, but the result wasn't quite the same. I felt like I was moving through thick mud, tired and slow, and I only started to feel good when I was in the whirlpool.

Wishing I could stay in forever, I eventually dragged myself out of the whirlpool, past the benches that seemed to be calling my name, and into the shower. After nearly boiling myself, I felt awake enough to get ready for work. Barely.

At the office, I found an email from Kegan. Short and sweet, just saying he was out of the restaurant until the afternoon but I could call him if I needed him. Just as well; I might have ended up asleep on his lap.

I settled down with my work, but I could hardly keep my eyes open and couldn't concentrate on anything for more than ten minutes at a time. After struggling through until about eleven-thirty, I went out for an early lunch. Staring at the options in the food court, I looked for something that would give me a burst of energy, something loaded with fat and calories and sugar.

I went to McDonald's.

I returned to the office just after one. Lou accosted me as soon as I arrived.

"There you are. I need you to take these artwork catalogues over to Kegan's. What took you so long?"

The honest answer? I'd fallen asleep on the table at McDonald's. I'd closed my eyes for a few seconds, just to rest them, and it must have been too much of a temptation for my tired body.

When the food court was full of people taking a quick lunch break and looking for a place to sit, an embarrassed McDonald's worker had poked me gently in the shoulder.

"Miss? Miss? We need this table."

I'd snapped awake to find myself the center of attention. I'd apologized groggily, thrown out the rest of my food, and walked slowly back to work sucking down my remaining Coke to try to jolt myself awake.

I didn't tell any of this to Lou.

"Slow service at the food court."

As there was very often slow service, Lou swallowed this story. Probably more easily than the truth would have gone down.

I walked the few blocks to Kegan's, picking up a coffee on the way, and the caffeine and the sunshine gave me part of the energy I needed. Kegan's smile of welcome when he saw me at the door did the rest of the job.

We settled down in his office area and began going through the catalogues. After about an hour, he got up to talk to a few workers, and I took the opportunity to stand up and stretch, knocking over my purse as I did, which reminded me of the napkin therein.

When Kegan returned, I said, "I was talking to Larissa yesterday, and her friend Fiona-- do you remember Fiona? She's the one who asked you about the restaurant."

"I remember," he said. "The little blonde one who wanted to be a waitress."

I nodded. "Right. Well, she--" Why was it so hard to say this to him? "She wants your phone number."

He leaned back in his chair. "Did you give it to her?"

"No. I thought I should check if you were okay with it."

Our eyes met and held, and he said, "Sure, why not?"

I could think of a number of reasons, but did my best to keep them from my face. "I have hers for you," I said, finding the napkin and handing it over. He slipped it into his pocket without looking at it, and I had a brief flash of hope that he'd forget what it was and throw it away.

"Can I take a second to send your number to Larissa?"

"Sure, if you want to do it right away," he said, then added with a sly smile, "Is Fiona in a rush?"

"I have no idea," I said, forcing myself to meet his eyes calmly for a second before looking away to send the text message to Larissa. Punching the buttons with perhaps a little more force than necessary, I said, "I just don't want to

forget."

"No, you have a lot on your mind," he said.

You have no idea.

We were deeply involved with the catalogue when my cell phone rang about an hour later. "Probably Larissa making sure you gave me the number," he said, giving me a wink.

It probably was; Larissa was no fool and she might have suspected I didn't want to pass it along. I pulled the phone from my purse, and one glance at the screen made me dizzy.

"I'll take it outside," I said, almost running to the door with the ringing phone.

I was sitting on the edge of the huge concrete flower box that separated Steel from its neighbor, my arms wrapped around myself, when Kegan came to find me. He called my name quietly, and I stood up and turned to face him, fighting to keep myself under control.

He took a few quick steps toward me. "Candy, what's wrong?"

I just shook my head, so full of emotion I could barely breathe, and he reached out and gently brushed a tear from my cheek. His touch, and the concern in his eyes, overwhelmed me and the tears spilled down my face again.

At once, he wrapped his arms around my shoulders and drew me to him. I knew I should push him away, shouldn't let him touch me or let myself touch him, but it felt so good to be held I couldn't find the strength. Instead, I slid my arms around his waist, rested my cheek against his chest, and cried.

The familiar scent of his cologne took me back to the days when everything had been easy and simple, and my sobs intensified. How had my life gotten so complicated?

Kegan held me close, stroking the top of my head, running my ponytail through his fingers, murmuring words I couldn't hear but which comforted me anyhow, until eventually I calmed down enough to feel awkward in his embrace. I let go

of him, and he took a step back immediately but kept one hand on my shoulder. Our eyes met.

"Are you all right?"

I nodded, not sure I could speak yet.

"Is it... did something happen to..."

I took a deep shuddering breath, let it out slowly, and shook my head. "No, Ian's fine. It wasn't him anyhow."

"Good. I thought it might have been, the way you raced out." He paused for a moment, then went on. "If you don't want to tell me, it's okay. If there's anything I can do to help, though..."

I swallowed hard. After the comfort he'd given me, he had the right to know. More than that, I wanted him to know. I stared down at the ground and said, "It was my doctor. I had a... an abnormal test result, and she was rechecking it. She thought it might have been cancer."

His hand tightened on my shoulder but he didn't speak.

"She was just calling to say--"

I heard her words echo in my head and the tears rose again. Kegan moved toward me and I managed to gasp through my sobs, "She said I'm fine," and then lost control, throwing my arms around his neck and burying my face in his shoulder.

"Everything's okay?" I could hear the relief in his voice and it made me cry even harder. I nodded in answer, and he gave me a brief tight squeeze and then held me gently but firmly until I pulled myself together.

"Sorry," I said, swiping tears from my cheek with the back of my hand. "I shouldn't be so emotional at work, and I've soaked your shirt."

"Candy, I couldn't care less. I'm just glad you're all right. And you've got every right to be upset. Especially with... well, everything else." He smoothed away a few tears I'd missed, his fingers soothing against my skin. "And... she's sure?"

I nodded. "She had them do a more definite test. There's nothing there."

He smiled, and a grin spread over my face too. We stood beaming at each other for a few seconds before he said, "I hate to say it, but you're looking a bit raccoony."

I rubbed under my eye and my finger came back black with mascara. "Oh, great," I said, feeling giddiness bubble up in me just as the tears had earlier, "I'll go back in there and everyone'll know I was crying." I looked up at him and made my eyes wide with mock horror. "Hey, they'll all think you made me cry. They'll think you're a monster!"

"Well, I can't have that," he said, and began fishing in his pockets. "You don't have your purse out here, do you?"

I shook my head just as he came up with a napkin. *The* napkin. "Come here," he said, putting a hand back on my shoulder and bringing me toward him.

"You can't, that's got the phone number--"

"She'll call me if she wants to. Or I can get it later. Whatever." And I stood, eyes closed, as he cleaned the tears and mascara from my face. I felt awkward knowing he was studying me so closely, having him do something so intimate. At the same time, though, it was so comforting to have someone taking care of me that I was almost disappointed when he said, "There you go, you're perfect."

I opened my eyes, feeling suddenly shy. "Thanks." I smiled at him but couldn't meet his eyes. "I... um, I guess we should get back inside. Lots to do."

A strange look, half concern and half amusement, spread over his face. "You're ready to get back to work?"

I shrugged. I didn't know what I wanted to do, but I was here, and work was here, so it seemed like the right thing to do.

Kegan glanced at his watch. "It's three. I think you should go home. Go out and celebrate."

"But--"

He shook his head. "Plenty of time to get the work done tomorrow morning. I'll make a list of the prints I like the most, and you can help me choose the final ones then. I promise not to tell Lou. Deal?"

I didn't want to leave, but there was no way I could say that. "Deal."

"Okay, I'll just grab your stuff for you." He smiled at me and strode back into the restaurant, dropping the napkin into the garbage can on the way.

My cell phone beeped as I climbed the stairs out of the subway station. I'd had a difficult trip, swinging between wanting to laugh hysterically and cry just as hysterically, and I was afraid to listen to the new voicemail. What if the doctor had realized she'd made a mistake?

"Give me a call when you get a chance. It's important."

I stepped off the sidewalk to avoid being trampled by the early commuters, and pressed the right speed-dial button.

"Hi, it's Candice. What's wrong?"

"What are you doing tonight?"

"You told me to go and celebrate."

There was a brief pause before he said, "Yes, but *are* you? What are you going to do?"

"Play with the cat and watch television?" There would almost certainly be more crying as well, but I decided to keep that to myself.

"I hate the thought of you being alone. Can't you go out with Larissa or someone?"

I'd called Larissa on the walk from the restaurant to the subway station. She'd been thrilled by my clean bill of health, but had added, "I wish I could take you out tonight but we have a late shoot. I won't be done here until eleven at the earliest."

"No, she's busy. And nobody else knew about it, so I'd have to explain it all and it's just too much."

The pause was slightly longer this time. "*I know about it.*"

He left the words hanging until I had to say, "Yes, but--"

"But what?"

But you don't want to go out with me. And even if you do... "But you have work to do. And you have your own plans."

"I have no plans for tonight. Well, actually, I do now. What are we going to do?"

Being with Kegan sounded wonderful and horrifying at once. I didn't make any suggestions, so he said, "How about dinner?"

I couldn't do that. Some little cozy corner of a restaurant, food and wine and too much talking. Too much like a date. I said, "I don't think I'm up to that."

"Okay... hey, I know. What about Wonderland? I haven't been for ages, and it's probably not busy tonight. Might be fun."

I didn't want to be home alone. An amusement park would probably be okay. With people everywhere, it definitely wouldn't be as intimate as a table for two.

"Are you sure you want to?"

"Wouldn't have suggested it if I didn't. So, we'll both drive there?"

I knew I shouldn't go. But he was right, I didn't want to be home alone. But spending the evening with him? I didn't know what to do.

"Candy?"

"What time do you want to meet?"

After a quick shower and change of clothes, I was waiting at the front gates of the amusement park at five. Kegan had said he'd be there as close to five as he could, but getting out of downtown Toronto at rush hour wouldn't be easy. Still, I

didn't want to make him wait so I made sure I was there right on time.

A good thing, too; I saw him walking toward me only a few minutes after I arrived, wearing black shorts and a forest green t-shirt instead of his work clothes. He smiled and quickened his pace.

"How are you doing?" He put his hand on my shoulder and looked into my eyes. Usually just a social question, but this time it was real. He'd been worried about me. I could see it.

"Not too bad. I should be jumping for joy, and I do but then I get choked up again." As if they'd decided to prove the truth of my words, I had to blink away yet another rush of tears.

The hand on my shoulder slid across my back and he gathered me into his arms. "You've had a tough day. I think it's probably normal."

I dropped my head to his chest for a second, drawing comfort from his embrace, before I pulled away. "If I'm doing it, it's not normal. Ready to go in?"

He gave me a quick squeeze and let me go. "Sure."

When we reached the ticket booth, he refused to let me pay for myself. "I told you, we're celebrating. I can't let you pay for your own celebration."

I tried to thank him, but he wouldn't let me do that either. "Enough talking. Where are we going first?"

As the train swept over the hills and valleys of the huge wooden roller coaster, I was too busy screaming to talk. It was a rough ride, the cars shaking wildly back and forth, but it was my favorite ride in the park. Near the end, the train whipped through a metal tunnel, and as always everyone shrieked as loudly as they could.

As we climbed out of the cars, Kegan tapped his ear. "I've gone deaf, Candy, nice job. Think you were loud enough?"

I crossed my eyes and stuck my tongue out at him. He pretended to grab at it, and I tried to bite him.

"Think you're immature enough?"

I laughed. "Just about."

He grinned, then looked around at the rides nearby. "Hey, let's do this one next."

I looked at the ride he was pointing to and shook my head. "I hate those spinny ones."

"Why?"

"I'm afraid I'll get sick."

"Have you ever ridden one?"

I shook my head.

"Then how do you know you'll get sick?"

The triumph in his voice made me laugh. "I don't. It's a guess."

"Well, let's find out." He grabbed my hand and pulled me into the ride's line.

"I don't *want* to find out. You want me to be sick?"

"You won't be sick, silly girl. I'll protect you."

"You'll protect me from throwing up."

He smiled. "I won't allow it."

"I don't think that's how it works."

"I'm the customer, Candy, I'm always right. Didn't Lou teach you anything?"

As we waited in the line, I watched the ride spinning around. It had lots of little chairs attached to what looked like awfully thin chains, and as it lifted the chairs tilted and swung out into space. There was more screaming than there'd been in the tunnel of my roller coaster.

Kegan turned me to face him. "Stop staring at it, you'll just make yourself

nervous. It'll be fine, really. You have to try new things."

"I've thrown up before. I don't need to try it again."

We didn't talk for a little while, and that suited me just fine. I didn't have anything to say, and it was enough just to be there, away from all my problems. I looked around, taking in the sun and the laughing voices, but my eyes always returned to Kegan.

I'd thought being here would be less intimate than dinner out, but I'd forgotten how the other guests seemed to fade away. All the noise and chatter were background. Kegan was front and center, only a few feet away.

"Did you call Ian?"

I shook my head. "I'm only allowed to call in an emergency."

"Doesn't telling him you don't have-- you're fine count?"

"He-- no, I'll just email him."

Kegan studied me. "He doesn't know, does he?"

I closed my eyes and sighed. "Not as such."

"I don't understand. Why wouldn't you--"

I opened my eyes. "Because I needed him to go, and he needed to go," I said. "He's doing amazing stuff out there, and if he knew about the test he wouldn't have gone." At least, I didn't think he would have. It hit me for the first time that I didn't know for sure what he would have done. Had I not told him because I didn't want to find out that he'd have gone anyhow?

"But..." Kegan paused. "I get it, I think. I'd have wanted to know, if I were him, but I get why you didn't. Didn't it make it harder on you, though?"

I nodded, remembering the bursts of anger and sadness I'd had in the weeks before Ian left, the little flare-ups we'd had because I couldn't control my emotions. "But it was easier on him."

"I don't think marriage is supposed to be easy, Candy."

I sighed again. "Ain't that the truth."

He smiled at me, and we returned to silence for a bit longer. As we approached the head of the line, he said, "Where do you want to sit?"

I took a look over my shoulder at the ride then turned back to him. "On that bench over there?"

He laughed. "Not an option. You'll love it."

"I won't. I won't, just to spite you."

"Well, we're going anyhow."

When we reached the front of the line, I looked up at the huge machine and shook my head. "No way. I am *not* going on that thing."

He leaned over and said into my ear, "It's your first time. I'll ask them to be gentle."

We laughed, but I felt a flash of heat at the memory of my other first time with Kegan. He *had* been gentle, and I'd actually enjoyed losing my virginity, unlike most of my friends.

The gate opened and I was swept onto the concrete surrounding the ride. *That* would feel lovely when I plummeted to my doom. Kegan caught my arm and pulled me to two of the outermost chairs. We climbed in and hung side-by-side as the attendant went around making sure the restraint bars were secure.

"I want to go home now," I said in my best whiny voice, making a pouty face to boot.

"Oops, sorry, no can do." Kegan grinned at me through the chains. "They've already locked us in."

The attendant checked our bars, I gripped the sides of my chair with both hands, and we were off. In no time, the ride was twirling and I was almost lying on my side. The wind made my eyes tear up, and I was screaming so loudly I could

barely hear Kegan laughing at me.

We spun and dipped and swirled and I screamed out my terror and sadness and frustration. When we began to slow, I was all screamed out, slumped in my chair laughing helplessly.

The ride stopped and I slithered out of my chair when the restraints opened. My knees buckled as my feet touched the ground, and Kegan wrapped his arm around my waist to hold me up. My arm went around him, and he helped me to the bench I'd been eyeing earlier. I sank down, still laughing.

"See, I knew you'd love it. I have to ask, though, is the screaming really necessary?"

I turned to him and said, as solemnly as I could through the remnants of my laughter, "There's only one ride in the park I don't scream on."

"What are we waiting for?" He rubbed his ear.

I stood, found I wasn't too wobbly, and we set off. I could see the top of the ride I wanted, towering over the others, and I led us there, stopping only to ride a roller coaster or two along the way.

When we arrived, he looked up. "You don't scream on *this*?"

"Nope, there's no time. Plus it kind of takes your breath away," I said, heading for the line.

Kegan wasn't following me.

I turned back to see him standing in the middle of the path, heedless of the people flowing around him. He looked like how I'd felt at the swings ride.

"Get off the road," I called, laughing. He took a few steps toward me before stopping again.

"I don't like the ones with a steep drop like that."

"Have you tried it?"

"Yes."

Our eyes met. "You have not."

He winked at me. "You're right, and it's a streak I want to keep alive. Thirty-three years of not leaving my stomach at the top of some insane ride."

"Thirty-three years of being a wuss, you mean. And you're proud of it?"

"This from the girl who was afraid of the swings."

"Was afraid. Not any more. Let's go."

Moving a bit closer to me, he said, "Are you really cruel enough to put me through this?"

I raised my eyebrows and gave him my best evil grin.

"I was afraid you'd say that," he said with a sigh.

"I'll ask them to be gentle." As I said the last words, screaming filled the air. We turned to watch the ride in action. The round car full of people dropped, from what I'd heard was a seven-storey height, as if its supports had been cut. Just before it crashed into the ground, the brakes kicked in and lowered the car slowly the last few feet.

I turned back to Kegan, and couldn't suppress a smile at the look on his face.

"And people call this fun?"

"I call it fun. You'll love it."

And with that, I grabbed his wrist and pulled him along with me.

The next few hours passed in a flurry of excitement and laughter. With each ride, I felt a little more relaxed and happy, and a little more comfortable with Kegan. We had dinner, which he bought for me, and shared a fried funnel cake topped with icing sugar, and he made fun of me for getting the sugar all over myself. It felt almost like being there with Larissa.

Night began to fall around nine o'clock. We hadn't talked about how late we'd stay, but Kegan showed no signs of wanting to leave.

"The roller coasters are the best when it gets dark," he said as we waited in the line of yet another of the spinning monstrosities he loved and I was beginning to develop a taste for. "You come up the first big hill, and then the car goes over the top and it's all dark down the track. You don't know where you're going."

I smiled at his enthusiasm, then my smile faded as I held his gaze.

"What?"

I swallowed. "Thank you."

He took a step closer to me. "For what?"

I opened my hands in an "all this" gesture.

He shook his head. "Nothing to thank me for. I needed a break too." His arm slid around my shoulders, and he added, "I'm just glad you're all right."

Blinking hard, I dropped my head to his chest, and he tightened his arm around me. We stayed together until the line moved up again.

As our last roller coaster cruised up its first hill, I stood, securely strapped into my restraints, and looked around. The sky was dark but the park was ablaze with lights. It was fascinating being so far above it all, and I wished the ride could stop and leave us up there, at least for a few minutes.

Kegan apparently didn't share my opinion. "I can't believe you got me on this one. I hate stand-up coasters. They make my stomach feel weird."

"You *are* weird, so too bad," I said, laughing. The train reached the top of the hill, but instead of going straight down the ride took a smooth curve, extending the anticipation of the descent. I brought my hands up and wrapped them around the restraints, knowing from past experience that I'd want to be holding on tight.

I gasped as the train took a sudden dip to one side. I knew it was there but it always startled me when it happened. A second gasp escaped me when Kegan

put his hand over mine. I looked toward him, barely able to see him through the thickly padded bars of the restraints, and tried to pull my hand away. He maintained his grip.

"I hate this ride," he said, and from what I could see of his face he was telling the truth. It was also obvious it was hard for him to admit it. He'd said he didn't like it before I'd dragged him into the line, but I hadn't realized how serious he was.

My heart melted. I opened my fingers to him and felt him interlock his fingers with mine and squeeze my hand. As if that had been the signal, the train shot over the crest of the hill, carrying us down into darkness.

When the park closed at ten, we walked in silence, swept along by the crowd, out to the parking lot and to my car, parked a little closer than his.

"Now, *this* is cute," he said, surveying it from every angle. He looked over at me. "It suits you."

I smiled. "I love it."

He leaned against my car, and I stood in front of him.

"Thank you," I said, feeling awkward but wanting him to know how I felt. "I had such a good time. I really appreciate it."

He pushed away from the car and took a step toward me. "I'm glad. You deserve it." He paused, eyes roaming my face, before adding, "Will you be okay when you get home?"

I nodded. "I think I'm done crying, at least for today."

"Good. I'll see you sometime tomorrow morning at the restaurant."

"Any particular time?"

He shook his head. "I'll be there, so whatever works for you. Take care of yourself, Candy."

He smiled at me and turned to walk away.

"Kegan?"

He turned back, and we stared at each other. I didn't know why I'd called him back. I hadn't meant to; it had just happened. For the space of a few of my pounding heartbeats, we stood silent. I didn't know what I wanted, but I didn't want him to leave.

Moving a little closer, he put his hand on my arm. He gazed into my eyes for a moment, then gave my arm a gentle squeeze and said in a low whisper, "Good night, Candy."

"Good night," I whispered back, and this time I let him go.

I had a new one from Ian, and I read it three times, unable to believe his words and the fury behind them. If I'd suggested he castrate himself with a dull knife I wouldn't have expected as angry a reaction as he'd given me to the suggestion of counseling. What was his problem?

I was about to respond in kind when I noticed to my surprise I had a second email from him in my mailbox.

To: ninjacatrocks@hotmail.com

From: ianw@buildaid.com

Subject: Re: Re: I miss you

Sorry, Candice. I might have overreacted there just a bit. But I really don't think we need counseling. We'll be fine. When I get home, we'll try to do more things together and have a little more fun. I know you really want to go to Wonderland, so maybe we can go before the end of the season. It closes in October, right?

I don't want to talk to anyone about our problems. We don't really HAVE any, I don't think. Just leftovers from my parents, and I kind of think that'll be fine after I get home too. I've been doing a lot of thinking out here.

Anyhow, I hope work and everything is going well. Things are good here.

I love you.

Ian

Overreacted just a bit. The master of understatement struck again.

And had any part of what he'd been thinking about been what he'd said to me the day they'd died? Because if not, if we couldn't talk about that either, we would not be fine at all. And why'd he have to mention Wonderland, of all things?

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacat rocks@hotmail.com

Subject: Re: Re: Re: I miss you

I didn't mean to upset you. If you think we'll be okay, then I guess we will be.

Everything's fine here.

I love you too.

Candice

I reread my response over and over, not satisfied with it but not sure what to add. I didn't want the kind of marriage where we just drifted along, not fighting but not really in love either. I wanted passion and romance and emotion and--

My cell phone, plugged in beside the computer, signaled the arrival of a text message.

Thanks for an amazing evening. Wish we could go there every night. I'll have a coffee here for you tomorrow if you text me when you're on your way. Take care of yourself.

I read this over and over too then reluctantly deleted it without replying, sent off my email to Ian, and got ready for bed.

What was I *doing*? I'd spent a wonderful day with Kegan and hadn't thought of Ian at all. I did have to work with Kegan, yes, but there was no reason to be spending time with him outside of work.

No reason, except that I enjoyed it. Which was probably the worst reason of all.

Wednesday, August 10th

My alarm went off in plenty of time for me to get to the gym, but I couldn't haul myself out of bed even though I'd had more than enough sleep. I felt made of lead, all heavy and dragged down.

True, Ninja was lying across my legs, but it was more than that.

I'd been doing so well, though, going every day, and I didn't want to break the streak. It took every ounce of willpower I possessed, plus a few borrowed from Ninja, but I finally managed to pull myself to a standing position. I dressed slowly and walked heavily down the stairs, then fed the cat and headed to the gym.

It was an absolute disaster.

I managed to walk on the treadmill for ten minutes before I couldn't go any longer. One minute on the elliptical nearly killed me, and the mere idea of lifting weights made me want to throw up.

I floated in the whirlpool, feeling miserable. Shouldn't I be getting stronger, instead of weaker? What was I doing wrong? A gym employee carrying a basket of towels walked past, and on impulse I called her over.

"I'm getting more tired the more I come here. Shouldn't I be getting *less* tired?"

"How often are you coming?"

"Every day."

She blinked. "Since when?"

I thought back. "Last Wednesday. I didn't come on Sunday, but I was here twice on Thursday."

"I think you're pushing too hard. Come three times a week, four at the most, for a few months, and--"

I cut her off. "Months? I want to lose weight fast."

"If you keep this up, you'll totally burn out. Better to do three good workouts than five terrible ones."

"Good point. Thanks."

She smiled and walked away.

Was she right? It seemed like it should be 'the more gym the better', but it certainly wasn't working out for me at the moment. I could barely gather the strength to climb out of the whirlpool.

After I got dressed, I walked into the gym's lounge area and settled down on the plushiest couch I could find. I set my cell phone's alarm for thirty minutes, and probably slept for at least twenty-nine of them. I did feel a little better after my nap, but still so lethargic. I decided to try the gym girl's advice; my way seemed more likely to kill me than to make me thinner.

I had a few things to take care of at the office, so as I left the gym it would have made perfect sense to head straight there. Instead, I hovered on the gym's front steps, unable to decide which way to go. Left led to the office. Right led to Kegan. I dithered for a few seconds, then headed off.

Turning right, I walked along in the warm sunshine, weaving through the crowds of people heading to work. I often wondered whether those people were happy with their lives, whether most of them were looking forward to getting to work or dreading it. Today, though, I found myself thinking about their love lives instead.

Why did it all have to be so confusing? Why couldn't people just be with whomever they wanted without laws and rules and restrictions? Did all of society's control over relationships make people happier, or was it maybe better for us all just to follow our hearts?

I arrived at the restaurant and slipped inside to see Kegan, wearing a dark blue t-shirt that just reached the waistband of his black jeans, standing on a chair surrounded by his workers. So I wouldn't interrupt, I stayed just inside the door while he reminded them of a few deadlines and some tasks that needed to be finished. Someone asked a question, and he answered and then said, "Okay, back

to work."

When he climbed down from his chair, he was immediately engaged in conversation by a pretty redhead. They walked to the mirrors behind the bar and examined something I couldn't see with great interest, then they exchanged a few words and she nodded and left.

He stood still for a second, as if waiting to see if anyone else needed to talk to him, then turned and walked straight toward me. I watched him approach, a smile growing on his face, and felt an answering smile curving my lips.

"How're you doing?" His voice was casual, but his eyes told a different story.

I felt the thrill of being alive and healthy race through me, and I grinned at him. "I'm just great, and you? It's a gorgeous day, isn't it?"

"Gorgeous," he agreed. "And I'm fine too. Did you get my text message?"

"I did." I glanced around to make sure nobody was listening, then added, "I should be thanking you, not the other way around."

He shook his head. "I disagree, and the customer's always right so don't even think about thanking me. Now, you didn't send me a message, so you don't have a coffee. Want me to go get you one?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you, though," I said, emphasizing the 'thank you'.

He slapped me lightly on the arm. "What did I say about that? Okay, then, ready to pick some artwork?"

True to his word, Kegan had gone through the catalogue and circled about thirty pieces he liked. We sat at his desk, our shoulders touching companionably as we studied the pages together, and eventually got it narrowed down to the six we needed.

I stood up to get ready to go back to the office and place the orders. Kegan stood up too, and stretched, pressing his chest forward and arching his back. His t-shirt rose, exposing an inch or so of his stomach, dark-tanned and muscled. He'd always been proud of those abs, with good reason, and I'd loved to brush my fingers over them and feel the muscles contract at my touch. The sight of his

skin hit me like a thunderbolt.

He saw me looking, and pulled his shirt down as our eyes locked. There was no doubt in my mind he was thinking the same thing I was, and embarrassment mixed with remembered passion flooded me, dizzying me. He took a step toward me, his eyes full of something I couldn't let myself recognize, and I took two steps back. "I think we're done here, right?" I said, struggling to keep my voice steady.

He nodded, his eyes not leaving mine. We stared at each other for a moment, and then he looked down at his desk and picked up the catalogue. "You can give this back to Lou, I guess. Unless you'd rather I do it?" I could tell from the slight shake in his voice that he'd felt the same jolting connection. Was it as confusing to him as it was to me?

"No, that's fine," I said. He held the catalogue out to me, and I took it, being careful not to let my hand touch his.

"So, okay then," I said, putting the catalogue and the list of prints into my bag. "I guess I'll see you tomorrow. I think Lou's pretty much ready to show you the final plans. Afternoon, if that's okay?"

"Sure. Have a good day."

"You too," I said, turning and running headlong into one of his workers, who grabbed my arms to steady me.

"Sorry about that," he said, releasing me and giving me a friendly smile. "I guess I should walk louder."

I smiled back, and was about to make my escape when I saw a tattoo on the worker's upper arm, just below his t-shirt sleeve, of tiny tiger and lion heads all snarling at each other.

"Oh, I like your tattoo," I said, and his face lit up.

"Thanks. I didn't know exactly what I wanted when I went in there, just something with wild cats, but they were awesome."

"Where'd you get it done?"

"Neon. They're down on Queen Street, just past Bathurst."

I nodded. "I've actually been there."

"Cool," the worker said, then he added, "What did you get done?"

"Yeah, what did you get done?" Kegan chimed in.

"Nothing," I said, then surprised myself by adding, "Not yet, anyhow."

The worker grinned. "Well, when you do, go back there. They're fabulous."

I smiled, and he handed Kegan a few receipts and left.

Kegan raised his eyebrows at me. "Not yet?"

"I did see a polar bear one I liked, but..." I shrugged. "I just don't think I'm the type."

"You're the type," he said without any hesitation.

Surprised, and pleased that at least somebody thought I was, I said, "Why?"

"You like colors and designs and all that sort of thing," he said, waving a hand at the walls around us. "Look at those bathroom tiles you chose."

The bathrooms *had* turned out perfectly, and Lou had been impressed by my combination of colors. "Yeah, but that's different."

"How? It's still designs and colors."

"Not many colors in a polar bear," I said, and we laughed.

"You'll find a way," he said, his voice suddenly serious. "I have faith in you." Before I could think of an answer to this, he added, "Promise you'll show me when it's done," and winked at me.

I laughed. "If I get one, I'll think about it."

"Good enough," he said. "Bye, Candy."

Safely out on the street, I made my meandering way back to the office. The sun was warm but not overpowering, and I just couldn't bring myself to rush. Besides, I had to think.

I hadn't reacted to Kegan like that once at Wonderland, or when he'd been hugging me, or when we'd been sitting together with the catalogue, so why had the sight of his stomach shaken me so badly? I was sure he'd felt it too; what did that mean? What should I do about it?

I briefly considered talking to Larissa, but couldn't stop myself laughing out loud at the idea. She'd kill me, and then kill Kegan, and then kill us again for good measure, all before I even finished explaining.

Tasha would listen, but she was always a "live for the moment" kind of girl. She'd probably just tell me to have a little fling with Kegan and get it out of my system. Which wouldn't be much help either.

I needed support that I carried around with me. All the time. Embedded in me.

What would a polar bear do?

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacat rocks@hotmail.com

Subject: Congrats!

I'm glad your sunburn's getting better. You must have a good doctor there.

I don't know if I want to go to Wonderland after all, but we should definitely do something when you get back. We could always go out for dinner, but I know you don't enjoy that so much. A movie, maybe, if there's one we both like.

Take care of yourself.

C

Thursday, August 11th

"Good morning, Neon Tattoos and Piercings, Amber speaking."

"Umm, hi. I want to make an appointment. Or is that how this works? Do I make an appointment, or do I..."

"Well, we usually make appointments for tattoos. Piercings not so much, but we can. What did you want done?"

I cast a furtive glance around the break room. Empty. I admitted, "A tattoo."

"Any one in particular?"

I had to giggle. "Yes, of course. I want a polar bear on an ice floe looking up at a star."

"Oh, you were in last week, weren't you? That's so cool that you're going for it."

I hoped she'd still think it was cool if I passed out in the middle of the process.

"When did you want to get it done?"

"I was hoping for tonight after work."

"Sorry, we're totally booked. We could do tomorrow, though. Would six or so do you?"

"Six would be perfect. Do I need to do anything beforehand?"

"Yep, make sure you have something to eat before you show up. We don't need you fainting on us." She chuckled.

"I'll do my best," I promised, hoping she couldn't hear my nervousness.

I hung up the phone and sat down in front of a box of doughnuts, chose a maple-dipped one and took a bite. I wrinkled my nose: stale. I decided not to bother eating it.

I was getting a tattoo. What would my mother say? When I'd had a second piercing in my right ear, she'd acted as though I'd shaved my head and dyed my eyebrows green. I'd finally given up and taken the piercing out just to make her stop complaining.

Not a solution that would work with a tattoo, though. Not telling her, though, that would work. If I put it on my lower back the way Amber had suggested, I'd be able to hide it from just about everyone.

Not from Ian, though. What would he think? We had friends with tattoos, of course, but we'd never discussed whether either of us wanted one. I kind of wanted to surprise him with it, but not if it was going to upset him. On the other hand, the idea of not getting it was beginning to upset me. I loved polar bears and always would, so why not?

I could definitely hide it from Kegan. But did I want to? He was the only one who saw me as the tattoo type, and I liked that he did, but was I really going to pull up the back of my shirt and show it to him?

No, of course not. I couldn't do something like that at work, and I wouldn't be seeing Kegan anywhere else. Wonderland had been a one-off, an aberration. We were back to being professional, and that was where we had to stay.

I decided to get back to work, and reached for the stale doughnut to throw it away, only to realize that I'd actually eaten the whole thing while thinking about my mother and the tattoo. I sighed. If only agonizing over issues burned calories. I picked up a fresh coffee and headed back to my desk.

My in-box seemed to have exploded during my few minutes away. I flipped through the new additions and piled them fairly neatly on the floor under my desk. There, organized. I didn't have time to do anything with them; my most important task right now was to finalize the research for Kegan's restaurant and then give Lou the last pieces.

The office was louder than usual and I couldn't seem to concentrate, so I went for my secret weapon: the Meat Loaf CD I only listened to when I had to get down to work. It never failed me. I barely heard it as it played but somehow the sounds focused my attention.

In another success for Meat Loaf, I finished the research just as the CD wrapped around to the first song. As always, the urge to immediately print out my results and give them to Lou, then never do research again as long as I lived, was very strong, but I resisted, instead taking a few minutes to recheck my newly acquired facts. When I was sure I had everything right, I sent it to the printer and leaned back in my chair for a brief rest while the printer did its slow work.

I would have to see Kegan after lunch, and I didn't think I was ready. We'd been like best friends at Wonderland, but what I'd felt yesterday hadn't been just friends. The heat that seeing his slightly more private skin had sent through me... I hadn't felt it in a long time.

Tigger's laugh drew my attention to the computer, and I answered an email from one of our other clients while trying to remember when exactly I *had* last felt that way, felt such strong desire that I couldn't think of anything else.

Memories of my honeymoon swept over me and I felt my cheeks grow warm. I'd definitely felt it then. Since then? For sure, not since Ian's parents had died. When we'd had sex since then, somehow I'd felt even more distant from him instead of closer, and the lack of connection didn't do wonders for my libido.

The printer spat out the last page, and I pushed the thoughts out of my head, gave myself a quick coat of lip gloss, and took the printout to Lou's office.

"Perfect timing, I was just getting ready to finish Kegan's plans. Take a seat."

I did, and waited as he flipped through the pages.

"This all fits in fine with what I'd planned to do," he said, dropping the printout onto his desk. "It's... nearly eleven now. Can you find out if Kegan can see us at two? If he can, come see me at one and I'll make sure you're ready to present it."

"Sure," I said, feeling my heart give a little lurch at the thought of seeing Kegan. Nerves about presenting the plan. Naturally.

At two, after our practice run, Lou and I arrived at Steel. Kegan, his silver grey dress shirt and black pants a departure from his more relaxed outfits of the last few days, met us at the door and shook hands with Lou before turning to me.

"Nice to see you," he said, holding out his hand. I took it and we shook hands formally. After everything that had passed between us in the last week, I had to struggle not to laugh out loud. As Lou moved on into the restaurant, Kegan shot me a wink before following him.

Kegan and Lou stood on either side of me while I presented the plans. I felt nervous at first, but it passed quickly as I got into the details. Lou didn't say

much, commenting only when Kegan asked about why he'd made certain design decisions, leaving me to do the presentation truly on my own.

Kegan didn't take it easy on me, insisting that I go through every detail and grilling me on my research findings, but at last, after nearly two hours, I reached the final points, and then it was finished.

"Do you have any questions?"

Kegan shook his head slowly, looking down at the beautifully detailed design Lou'd drawn for the private dining room Kegan had requested at the last minute. "I don't know how I could. You've covered absolutely everything."

He looked past me at Lou. "Thank you for this." A smile grew on his face as he added, "It's like you went into my head and pulled out exactly what I wanted."

Lou smiled back. "That's what I like to hear. Thank Candice, though; without her research I wouldn't have been able to do it."

"She did a great job," Kegan agreed, then turned to me. "You really did. Thank you."

I couldn't keep a grin from my face. "You're welcome."

"You're lucky to have her," Kegan said to Lou.

Lou gave me a proud smile. "I know. If she keeps this up, she'll have my job some day. Some day *soon*."

I smiled back, but felt a strangely sick feeling in my chest. Did I even *want* his job? I didn't want to be an assistant forever, that was for sure. But I couldn't be a designer. I had no training.

Lou glanced at his watch. "I have a meeting at another client's site ten minutes ago. Candice, will you be in the office tomorrow?"

I nodded, and Lou shook hands with Kegan again and was gone.

Once we were alone, Kegan turned to me and held out his hand. "Congratulations." His handshake was just as professional as the first one had

been, but the warmth in his eyes didn't fit with it. "We have to go out for dinner to celebrate. Tomorrow night?"

I remembered how I'd felt with him yesterday, and I knew I shouldn't go. Plus, I had an appointment with some needles. "I can't." Before I knew it was coming, I added, "What about tonight?"

He shook his head. "Big meeting with the lawyers in an hour. It'll go right through dinner. Trust me, I'd far rather go out with you. I'm away all weekend, so that's no good. How's Monday night?"

I shouldn't go.

"Monday is fine."

He smiled. "Perfect. But I desperately need a coffee first. Actually, I need a stiff drink, but coffee will have to do. Can you spare me a few minutes so I don't fall asleep with the lawyers?"

We laughed, and I said, "Well, I guess so. For such a good cause."

"It is a good cause," he said as I packed the plans away carefully in their file folder. "Do you know what those guys charge an hour? If I'm going to pay that much to sleep with some--"

He cut himself off, looking sheepish, and I laughed. "Are you suggesting you'd want someone of, say, the oldest profession rather than a lawyer?"

"Candy, my goodness," he said, taking the folder from my hand and stowing it in his briefcase. "I have no idea what you mean."

"Of course not," I said. "Neither do I."

He grinned at me, and we headed out to the coffee shop together, where he insisted on buying me a drink and snack.

Standing behind me in line, he said into my ear, "I meant what I said to Lou. You did such a good job. I really am impressed."

I stared straight ahead, feeling my cheeks flaming and my mouth pulling into a

grin. "Thanks."

"No need to thank me, just telling the truth," he said, this time so close I could feel his breath stirring my hair. A shiver sped through me and I took a quick step forward. I was both glad and sorry when he didn't follow me.

Once we'd found a table and settled down, Kegan said, "That thing I said, about sleeping with the lawyers... that's such a George thing to say."

I looked up from the cookie he'd bought me. "He was a funny guy, I bet."

Kegan nodded. He took a sip of his coffee then said, "Can I tell you about him? I think you'd have liked him, and I know he'd have liked you." He chuckled. "I'd have had to fight him for you."

I blushed. "Oh, come on."

"I mean it," he said. "George loved sparky little brunettes."

This was so far from my own image of myself that I couldn't think of anything to say. No matter, Kegan had plenty, and I was soon crying laughing at the stories of their antics in law school, especially the pranks they'd pulled on their fellow students and professors.

"You can't have wrapped *everything* in his office in bubble wrap, that's just not--"

"Right down to the pen refills," he said, laughing along with me. "His secretary told us later it took him three hours to fix it. Which isn't bad, since we spent all night doing it."

"And you still passed his class?"

Laughing even harder, he said, "I had the top mark and George was second. He said he admired our determination and attention to detail."

Kegan's amusement faded, and I sobered as he said, "The attention to detail was definitely George's. I learned a lot from him in that area, about making sure you know exactly what you want and what you won't accept."

"I bet he learned a lot from you too," I said, wishing I could soothe his pain at losing his friend.

Kegan shrugged. "About the only thing George didn't have before me was risk taking. I encouraged him to try things. He went on the debate team because of me, put himself forward for student council. Hell, he only asked out the girl he ended up marrying because I said if he didn't I'd do it for him."

"What, ask her out yourself?"

"No, for him. I'd never steal a girl from a friend." Had he put just a bit of emphasis on 'friend' or was I imagining it? He and Ian weren't friends.

I definitely wasn't imagining the intensity in his eyes. "Candy, I--" He rubbed his forehead, staring down at the table. "Look, can I say something and have you not tell me why I'm wrong?"

"Of course." I wasn't sure what he meant, but he obviously needed to say whatever it was.

Without looking up, he said, "It's my fault George died."

I took this in for a second, then said, "Why do you say that?"

He looked up at me. "Damn it, Candy, thank you. I've only said that to a few people but they all immediately tell me it's not my fault and won't let me talk about it. But it is."

"He had a heart attack, right?" I said, planning to ease him around to realizing it wasn't his fault at all.

"He sure did," Kegan said, "in the middle of a session at the gym I'd made him join."

I pressed my fingers to my mouth and looked at him, longing to find just the right thing to say. He stared back, his eyes challenging but full of pain, and my heart twisted as I realized he was afraid I'd agree with him, agree he'd caused his friend's death. I reached out and put my hand over his, and he flipped his over and wrapped his fingers around my hand. A tingle shot through me at his touch but I ignored it. No time for that sort of thing. "Why did you make him join the

gym?"

"He was putting on a bit of weight, and he'd get out of breath climbing stairs," he said, tightening his grip on my hand. "I thought it'd be good for him." He gave a bark of laughter that hurt to hear. "I told him if he didn't lose weight he'd end up dying of a heart attack."

I shut my eyes against the tears. It wasn't his fault, of course, but what a burden to carry around with him. "Oh, Kegan," I said. Opening my eyes, I said, "I'm so sorry."

"If I hadn't made him go--"

"He was a grown man, it was up to him--"

"But I pushed him--"

"And he never resisted you on anything else? Ever?"

He stared at me. "Dude resisted me all the time. Complained I pushed him around. Even deciding where we'd go to eat lunch was a battle sometimes."

Feeling my way, I said, "Then don't you think he might have *wanted* to join the gym? Maybe it was your idea, but he's the one who paid, and went. You didn't make him do anything. It's horrible that he died there, yes, but he wouldn't have blamed you, and I don't think you should either."

We sat in silence for a few seconds, giving me just enough time to worry that I'd offended him before he pulled me to my feet and hugged me so tightly my ribs creaked.

"Thank you," he said into my ear. "I needed another way to look at it, because my way it always looked like my fault. Your way makes it seem so different. Thank you."

I tightened my arms around him, my eyes full of tears, and we stood together, my head pressed into his chest and his cheek against my hair, until a table of teenage girls behind us burst into applause and one said, "Congratulations, he's adorable!"

We broke apart to see the girls, still clapping, stand up and toast us with their coffee cups. "When's the wedding?"

I blushed, but Kegan grinned at them. "September fifteenth, I think," he said. "Next year, of course." He wrapped his arm around my shoulder and I slid mine around his waist to help him keep up the joke. "This year would be too soon, wouldn't it, honey?" He smiled into my eyes. "Only a crazy person would plan something big in just a few weeks."

"You'd have to be crazy," I said. "Certifiable."

He laughed, and the bravest of the girls said, "Are we invited?" making the rest giggle.

"Sure," Kegan said, sweeping a smile across the table that turned several of the girls beet red. "Check your mail box in a few months."

They lost themselves in uncontrollable giggles, and Kegan and I sat down again, this time on the same side of the table so both our backs were to the girls.

"Well, that was interesting," he said, smiling at me.

"I'd like to say I was never that giggly, but I know I was," I admitted. "It's a teenage girl thing. I drove my mother crazy when I was fifteen or so with it."

"I bet you were adorable," he said, imitating the girl's tone.

I batted my eyelashes, looking as cute and ditzy as I could, and we both laughed. "Yup, adorable," he said, and my cheeks flamed at the affection in his voice.

"And smart, too," he added. "How'd you know what I needed to hear?"

Focusing on the half-eaten cookie in front of me, I said, "Ian's parents died to get me a Christmas present. Trust me, I know guilt."

He put his hand on my shoulder, and I turned to face him but didn't look up. "Are you sure it was for you?"

"Unless they knew someone else who'd want a giant stuffed animal made to look like a polar bear skin rug, yes." The rug had been found in the car's trunk, in

heartbreakingly perfect condition. It was in our basement in its cardboard box; I couldn't stand to look at it but hadn't been able to make myself throw it out.

"But nobody said it was your fault, right?" His grip on my shoulder tightened. "How could anyone think--"

"Just like how you did," I said, raising my face to look him in the eye. "They wouldn't have been there if it hadn't been for me."

He said nothing, looking at me with compassion, and I added, "It's like you said. I *know* it's not my fault, but I can't *feel* it's not. Nothing feels right any more."

I swallowed hard against the rising tears, and he slid his hand down and around my back. "Candy, did... who said it was your fault?"

Could I tell him? Would it help? I stared at the table then made up my mind. Just as I took a breath to speak, he pulled his arm away from me and said, "Look, we should run through those plans quickly once more before I go to the lawyers. Okay?"

Without waiting for my reply, he jerked the folder from his briefcase and spread the plans on the table, narrowly avoiding knocking over my coffee.

Apparently he'd had enough of the personal discussion. Fine, then. I'd wanted us to stay professional anyhow. "Sure, sounds good," I said, holding my voice steady with effort. "Anything in particular you wanted to know?"

"Yes," he said, then, "No. Just keep--"

"Well, hello there."

I looked up to see Larissa standing in front of our table, eyes narrowed. "How... cozy. The chairs on this side of the table don't work?"

"Difficult to see the plans if we're on opposite sides," Kegan said, seeming not to notice her antagonistic tone.

"I suppose," she said. "No room at the restaurant to check them out?"

"I needed coffee," he said, "And Cand-- Candice was good enough to oblige."

We're pretty much done now, though. Want to sit down?"

"No, that's fine," she said. "I wouldn't want to interrupt."

Again he ignored her tone, now bordering on rude. "Actually, you wouldn't be. I need to leave for a meeting, so you'd just be keeping Candice company, which I'm sure she'd appreciate." He got to his feet and packed the plans away.

"Candice, I'll see you sometime tomorrow. Larissa, always a pleasure."

And he was gone, weaving his way through the crowd toward the door. Larissa and I watched him go, then she turned to me. "What are you--"

"I'm working," I said.

"Snuggled up to *him*?"

If she'd been there a few minutes earlier she'd have seen some serious snuggling. I forced a laugh. "Don't be ridiculous. He needed coffee, and we needed to go through the plans, so..." I shrugged.

And I had needed to tell him about what Ian had said to me, and I didn't get to. As I had a thousand times before, I considered telling Larissa. And, just like all the other times, I decided not to. She knew Ian, knew and liked him, and I didn't want her opinion of him changed by what was almost certainly a comment born from his anger and pain at his parents' death and not true blame of me.

Almost certainly.

Ian had skipped emailing me a few times, so I took the night off myself, not even bothering to log in to see if he'd written. I had too much to think about.

I was playing with fire and I knew it. The more time I spent with Kegan the more I remembered everything I'd loved about our time together, loved about him, and the more Ian seemed to fade.

But when I was with Kegan, *I* seemed to brighten, and I didn't want to give that up. Something about the way he saw me made me feel better and stronger and more professional than I'd ever felt before, more able to handle things.

I liked it.

Friday, August 12th

I woke up determined to cancel. I wouldn't meet Kegan. It was dangerous. Going to Wonderland with him had been one thing, but this was basically a dinner date and I couldn't do that.

Could I?

No, I could not. I would email him and tell him something had come up. Overtime at work. Spanish Flu. Ninja needing an intervention to stop him chewing plastic bags. Anything.

Ninja's plaintive howls forced me to drag myself out of bed. I fed the furry little brute and then went to the gym. I was nervous, given how difficult my last workout was, but this one went very well. Of course, I only did half of what I'd done the last time, and I'd taken a day off, so it probably wasn't a big surprise. Still, I'd gone, and that was good.

Proud of myself, I went home to shower. I was especially careful to scrub my back to shining perfection; it wouldn't do to have my tattoo artist ("my tattoo artist". I had a tattoo artist!) offended by the state of my skin.

I spent ages deciding what to wear. I needed something that was appropriate for the office while still providing easy access to my back.

Did most people panic so much about their outfit for getting a tattoo? Probably

not. Maybe I wasn't the tattoo type after all.

Maybe not.

But I wanted to be.

Kegan called me at about eleven. "Candy, I need your help." He sounded strange, almost nervous.

"Of course. What's up?"

"Can you come here?"

I cast a glance at my calendar. Wide open. Lou and I had talked in the morning and I had a lot of tasks, but nothing that had to be done immediately. "Sure. Should I bring Lou? Is there something wrong?"

"No, it's fine. I just need to talk to you. See you soon."

I sat staring at the phone as if it held all the answers. It didn't. Only one person did.

When I got to the restaurant, Kegan was just as vague. He smiled at me, but then looked away and didn't seem to be able to meet my eyes. He asked me to explain Lou's plans for his office area, but I knew that wasn't the real reason I was there.

At noon, his workers headed out in small groups. A few invited us to join them, but Kegan turned them all down, saying we had work to do. As if to prove this, he asked a few more questions about the designs, all of which we'd covered the day before.

The last one to leave was the guy with the tiger and lion tattoo. He smiled at me, and said, "Got your tattoo yet?"

"Tonight," I said on a whim, and we all laughed. The guy waved, the door closed behind him, and Kegan and I were alone.

"Tonight, eh?" Kegan echoed.

I blinked twice, making my best innocent face, and said nothing.

"You promised to show it to me if you get one, don't forget."

"I did no such thing."

He returned my innocent face, then suddenly turned serious. I felt my skin prickle. I was about to find out why I was here, and I so didn't want to know.

Apparently Kegan didn't want to tell me any more than I wanted to hear, because he said, "I'm sorry I cut you off yesterday at the coffee shop. I just saw Larissa come in and figured we'd better be working when she spotted us. Did she say anything?"

"Not much," I said. He raised his eyebrows, clearly not believing me, and I had to laugh. "Okay, she wasn't exactly thrilled, but she didn't say anything about seeing us not working, so I guess you fixed it in time."

"Yeah, but you didn't get to finish what you were saying. If you want to, any time, I'm ready to listen."

"Thanks," I said, trying to smile. I wanted to, but I couldn't just jump into it.

We sat in silence for a second, then he reached for the plans again. Idly turning the pages of Lou's design, he said, "I had a phone call last night." He took a sip from a mug on his desk before going on. "Larissa's friend Fiona."

He met my eyes then, at the worst possible time, as I was battling the strongest jealousy I'd ever felt. I didn't want him to see her. I had no claim to him, and didn't even want one. He could see anyone he liked. Just not Fiona. She wouldn't be good for him.

I turned my head away and swallowed hard, then said, "Oh?", trying to keep my voice neutral, with maybe just a hint of interest but no real concern.

"And I don't know what to do."

When I didn't speak, he said, "What do you think I should do?"

"It's nothing to do with me," I said, willing the words to be true. "Fiona's nice

enough, I guess, from the little I know of her. Seems a little flaky, but that's probably just me. If you want to go out with her, then go. If not, then at least be nice to her, because if you're not Larissa will find you and make you cry. Do you want to see her?"

He shook his head slowly, staring past me at the street reflected in the bar's mirrors. "I don't know what I want any more." He sounded so tired, almost defeated.

"Is this why you wanted me to come here?"

He nodded. "I need advice."

Then write to a columnist or something. Don't ask me to send you out with another woman. "I can't tell you what to do. It has to be what you want." I forced myself to go on. "Maybe you should just go out with her. What have you got to lose?"

Our eyes met.

"I've got nothing to lose, I guess."

"There you go," I said, with a lightness I definitely didn't feel. "Did you talk for a while?"

He nodded. "Ten minutes or so. Then she had to go. She... um... she suggested that we should go out for dinner sometime."

"Take her on Monday, if you want."

"No," he said, no doubt in his voice. "That's for you."

"If you're sure."

"I am."

The longer I sat with him, the more I knew that dinner on Monday was a dreadful idea. I was already feeling jealous, possessive of him, when I had no right to be. Spending more time with him outside of work was only going to make that worse.

"Look, I think you should go with her instead."

"Why?"

Just one word, and so hard to answer. I settled for, "I don't think we should be seeing each other outside of work."

"We went to Wonderland."

"Yeah, but that was different."

"Why?"

"Because you were helping me celebrate that phone call."

"So this is celebrating Lou saying you did a great job. There's no difference."

I considered this. It made sense. What made even more sense was when he said, "That Wonderland trip, that's the most fun I've had as far back as I can remember. I'd really like to have this dinner with you. But if you don't want to, I can understand. I won't push you."

I knew he meant it. And I knew something else.

"I do want to go."

He smiled at me. "Shark Bait at seven?"

"I've never been there, so sure," I said, smiling back at him.

"We'll consider it research."

Somehow, I got through the rest of the day. My mind wasn't exactly on my work, though. I hung up on two callers by mistake, accidentally shredded the proposal I was supposed to be taking to the fax machine, and spilled coffee on my computer. The highlight, though, was calling Lou's wife Luba "Beluga", the office nickname for her due to her bald spot that resembled a blow hole. Fortunately, Luba was hard of hearing, so I got away with it, but still, not my finest hour.

I couldn't stop thinking about Kegan. I'd never thought we could be friends

again, and I was genuinely happy that we were heading in that direction. I didn't know how Ian would feel about it, but I put that out of my head. The flickers of desire I felt when Kegan looked at me? I put those out of my head too.

When I wasn't thinking about Kegan, analyzing every word he'd said to me, every look, I was thinking about my appointment that evening. There was still time to back out. Once the tattoo was in my skin, it would be permanent. Some things can't ever be reversed.

At last, five o'clock came, and I began to pack up with unseemly haste.

"You're in a rush tonight," our kitchen designer Meredith said, reapplying her lipstick.

"Uh, yeah."

"Where are you going?"

"I, um..." Inspiration struck. "I have to go home."

Inspiration just ain't what it used to be.

"Why?"

"I... oh, fine, I'll tell you, but you can't laugh."

"Okay."

"I'm getting a tattoo."

Meredith dropped her purse and bent down to retrieve it. Either it was making a strange snorting noise, or she was.

"Hey!"

"I'm sorry, I'm trying not to. It's just so not you."

"It is too me."

"No, it's not. But hey, if you want it, that's okay. Want company?"

"No, I'll be fine. Go have a drink for me, and I'll show it to you tomorrow at the spa."

Meredith had arranged for a group rate at a spa, "since we're all so stressed at work these days". I'd never been to a spa, but this one sounded gorgeous. Set in two hundred acres of pine forests and rolling hills, it had a whirlpool, tons of relaxing spots to sit and lounge, and treatments made of chocolate. What could be better?

"Please don't, I hate tattoos." And with that, Meredith gave me a big smile and departed, leaving me standing alone and confused.

Did Ian hate tattoos? It hadn't seemed like it in his email; he'd just said he didn't think I was the type. What would I do if he hated it?

Did Kegan like tattoos?

And why on earth would that matter? Completely irrelevant.

Would he think it was sexy?

He wasn't even going to see it. Why did I care what Kegan thought?

I don't care, I told myself, and headed out.

I arrived about fifteen minutes early, which gave me time to grab a quick slice of pizza and a bottle of water, and time to obsess over what I was doing. Once all of those important tasks were accomplished, I walked on shaking legs into the tattoo place, past the sign on the door that read, "Warning: tattoos are addictive", and up to the counter. The same girl was there.

"Hey, ready for your bear?"

My bear. I'd been dreaming about that bear for years. And finding him here had to be significant. Didn't it? Things like that didn't happen for no reason. Something that major couldn't just be a coincidence.

"I guess," I managed, sounding, even to myself, like someone being asked if she was ready to have her head chopped off.

"It'll be fine," the girl said comfortingly. "I was terrified my first time, and look at me now."

Indeed. A walking billboard for Neon. I forced a weak smile and she patted me on the shoulder. "Might as well take a seat. Spike's just finishing up a tattoo, but he'll be ready for you in a few minutes."

Spike. I was about to get a tattoo from a guy named Spike. This could only be more of a cliché if I was wearing black leather and a ripped Metallica t-shirt.

Which I wasn't.

And never would be.

Some things are just not right.

I sat down and took deep breaths. I turned the lid of my water bottle back and forth, and tried to think calming thoughts. Pain-free thoughts. Tough thoughts.

Suddenly I knew I couldn't do it. I got up and headed for the door.

"Hey, polar bear, where are you going?"

I turned toward the deep voice, to see a huge man. Seriously huge. The big man at the gym the first day who'd taken my treadmill lumbered into my mind. This guy could beat up that guy. And he was wearing...

He was wearing black leather pants and a ripped Iron Maiden t-shirt. Close enough.

"I was, umm..."

"You were bailing out. You can't bail out on me, polar bear, I love that tattoo. I drew it myself, you know."

"Really? I didn't know that."

"So, you have to let me do it. I'll be gentle, I promise."

"Ummm.... okay."

I followed Spike (Spike. I still couldn't believe it) into the back room.

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacatrocks@hotmail.com

Subject: Sorry about yesterday

I was out for coffee with Larissa and just didn't feel like getting online when I got home. I didn't think you'd mind so much since you've missed a few days.

My design with your yarn is coming along well. I might just have it together by the time you get home.

Tell me more about what's happening there. What are the people like? Is your sunburn better?

C.

Saturday, August 13th

When I woke up, I was afraid to move. Was it going to hurt? Would it look hideous?

I still couldn't believe I'd done it. I had a tattoo.

When I followed Spike into the back room, I'd been terrified, my heart beating so fast I was sure he could hear it.

Maybe he could. He put his hand gently on my arm. "It's okay, polar bear. I know you're scared. Wanna know a secret?"

I nodded.

"Even I was afraid for my first one."

"You were?"

"Oh, yeah. I thought I was going to throw up."

"I know the feeling."

Spike said, "The first tiny bit is the worst. Once you know what it feels like, you'll be fine."

I took a deep breath, and said, "Well, then let's get that first tiny bit done."

Spike made a big deal of showing me that all of his instruments were sterile. Throughout, he kept up a running patter, explaining what he was doing, talking me through the process. It was strangely soothing.

Until he said, "Okay, we're good to go."

I caught my breath.

"Keep breathing and mangling that water bottle. You'll be just fine."

Spike motioned me to a table, and I lay down on my stomach and pulled my skirt and top out of the way. He transferred the drawing to my back, then had me get up and take a look in the mirror. I studied my back. Perfect.

I returned to the table, and Spike said, "Here we go, kiddo. Deep breath."

I took a breath and held it. The machine started to buzz, the buzzing noise became slightly louder, and then I felt the machine touch my back. Touch, and punch tiny holes in.

I continued to hold my breath, waiting for pain to explode through me. It never happened. It hurt, certainly. But it was such a precise pain, so focused on the area beneath the needle, that I didn't mind it much.

"You doing okay, polar bear?"

"Yup," I said. "I actually thought it would be a lot worse."

"There's my girl. You'll be getting a sleeve soon."

"Sleeve?" I asked, wincing as the needle passed over my spine.

"Tattoo covering your whole arm."

"Ah."

Ten minutes in, I was ready for the sadist with the pin to stop harassing my poor sunburn. It was still a precise pain, but the finished areas throbbed uncomfortably, and the more he did, the more parts throbbed.

"Hey, Spike?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think we could make the tattoo smaller? It's kind of starting to hurt."

"Well, babe, you're about a minute too late. I've done too much of the outline to change it now. Do you need a break?"

"No, I'll be okay," I said, and shoved the lid of my closed water bottle into my mouth. Chewing on my bottle seemed to help me handle the pain, so I kept it up. About the time the lid started to flake off little bits of plastic, Spike stopped the machine.

"Are we done?" I asked hopefully.

Spike laughed. "Well, the outline is done. Some people think the outlining is the worst, and some think the filling-in part is. Let's see what kind of people you are."

I, apparently, was the 'the filling-in is the worst' kind of people. I kept waiting for the machine to move on to a new area, but it stayed hammering away at the same tiny spot on my back until I thought I'd scream.

I'd taken the lid off my water bottle and was doing some serious chewing on its neck when Spike stopped the machine, wiped my back with a clean cloth, and said, "There you go. Polar bear, meet polar bear!"

I jumped to my feet and promptly got the worst head rush of my life. I could actually feel the blood draining from my head. By sheer good fortune, I managed to sit back down on the edge of the table before I fainted. Spike pushed my head down until it was hanging between my knees.

"Take it easy, Candice. Your body's had a shock. Just sit there for a minute."

I mumbled something even I couldn't understand.

"Pardon?"

I took a deep breath. "I said, I didn't think you knew my name."

Spike laughed, and I cautiously raised my head again. When that went off without a hitch, I slowly got to my feet. Good, blood staying where it belonged. I turned around and checked out my back.

Absolutely gorgeous. We stared at it in reverent silence for a moment, then he said, "Okay, let's get him covered up and you're on your way."

Five minutes later, having paid and given Spike a substantial tip, I was heading for the subway. It hurt a bit, but really not bad at all.

I sat on the subway, making sure my back didn't press into the back of the seat, reading the care instructions. Sounded pretty simple. Basically, I would leave the bandage on overnight, and then I would just wash the tattoo and make sure it stayed moisturized. No worries.

So now it was bandage-removal time. I sat on the edge of the bed and carefully peeled off the tape holding the gauze pad to my back. When the pad came off, I brought it around in front and checked it out. I had bled a bit, but nothing serious.

I padded to the bathroom in my polar bear paw slippers and whipped off my nightgown, then turned around, looked over my shoulder, and studied my new artwork.

It was still a bit pink; Spike had said it would take a good week or so to recover. Still, it couldn't have been more what I'd wanted if Spike had gone into my head and ripped out the image I'd been carrying around. The bear looked sweet and pensive, the star was softly shimmery, and the water looked so frosty that I shivered.

I had a tattoo. Whether or not I was 'the tattoo type', I now had a tattoo. I couldn't believe it.

While I waited for Meredith and my coworkers to arrive to take me to the spa, I tidied up the house. Somehow my usual housekeeping routines, such as they were, had fallen apart, and the place was starting to look like the stereotypical bachelor pad, with dishes and stuff everywhere.

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacatocks@hotmail.com

Subject: I'm going to the spa

I'm glad the work's going well and the people are nice. We're nearly halfway through your time away. I can't believe it's gone so fast.

I'm writing early because I'm off to the spa with Meredith and everybody and I'll probably be too relaxed later to write.

I'll check email tomorrow morning, and then I guess you'll call me tomorrow evening.

Have a good day.

C

I definitely couldn't believe how quickly the time was going; Ian would be home in two weeks and I'd done nothing about our marriage. Tomorrow afternoon, I would *have* to give us some serious thought.

My doorbell rang, and I quickly gathered my purse and a backpack I'd filled with everything I thought I might need (two novels in case I got bored with one, a book on how to reduce clutter, and a deck of cards in case we all got bored) and ran out to meet Meredith.

"What's with the backpack?"

I shrugged. "Just some stuff I thought I might need."

Meredith took the backpack from me and rifled through it. She zipped it back up with a jerk and flipped it into the trunk.

"It stays in the car."

"But what if I get bored?"

"You won't."

"I can't even eat breakfast without reading the cereal boxes."

"Really? That's pathetic. Anyhow, this place is different. It's so lovely and peaceful that time just seems to slow down somehow."

Great. A whole lot of slow time and nothing to do to fill it.

We picked up Allyson and our new coworker Marian, and I noticed that neither of them had brought anything with them. Well, there was nothing wrong with being prepared.

Unfortunately, I wasn't prepared for Allyson's immediate questioning about Kegan. She was barely in the car before she started quizzing me, wanting to know about his love life past, present, and definitely future, as well as his interests and hobbies... basically anything she could use to get him interested in her.

I answered her questions with as little information as I could, but Meredith and Marian, nearly as interested in him, had questions of their own, and I couldn't withstand their combined pressure. In fairly short order, I'd admitted I'd dated him instead of just his roommate as I'd told Allyson.

She tapped me on the head from her position in the back seat. "Bad girl. Don't lie about someone as hot as that."

"It's his eyes, mostly," Meredith said. "If he's not looking at you, he's still good looking but it's not the same. When he *does* look..." She sighed. I knew the feeling.

I held out for a while longer before confessing I'd been the one to end our relationship (a fact which left them stunned for a few blissful minutes before they renewed their interrogation), although I flatly refused to say why. They only gave up on that issue when I told them he was presently single.

I did tell them about Fiona, doing my best to make it sound like their engagement was imminent, but even knowing about her didn't cool their collective jets, which bothered me. If Kegan ended up dating a coworker of mine, it would make things awkward, and I didn't think any of them were right for him.

All in all, I was exhausted and ready for a vacation by the time we arrived at the spa.

Or maybe it was actually a summer camp, because it didn't look like any spa I'd imagined before. A fence made of warped and weathered boards that didn't seem to have ever felt the touch of a paintbrush surrounded a large patch of long grass studded with lounge chairs. The front door hung open, and the screen door was clearly on its last legs. The only saving grace was the luscious scent of chocolate wafting from the place.

Meredith led, and we followed, picking our way across a path made of concrete squares to the front door. Inside, the lighting was dim, but bright enough to show walls in serious need of a paint job and a cobblestone floor. Cobblestones inside? I must have looked somewhat quizzical, because Meredith leaned in and whispered, "This part used to be outside. Then they made it a sort of porch thing."

Well, that was good to know. Maybe the real inside of the place would be nicer.

And it was, although still not the glamour spot that I'd been expecting. The word 'spa' conjured up an image of vast expanses of white marble, gleaming mirrors, and beautiful people as far as the eye could see. Skinny people. Women like dark-tanned boards, with huge breasts attached. Men who looked like a cologne ad come to life.

This was so not that kind of place. But the inside was painted a soft tan, and the hardwood floor shone with the sun streaming in through the windows, and the smell of chocolate was even more intense. It was nice, although it was reminding me of something.

Allyson said softly, "I feel like I'm inside a Caramilk bar."

We all giggled. Yup, that was it.

We went to the registration counter and got ourselves signed in. I was having a wrap, which apparently involved being spread with a chocolate-based moisturizing cream and then being wrapped in warm cloths to hold it all against my skin. Then I would "rest and relax in our beautiful treatment room".

I wished Meredith had let me bring my book.

The receptionist gave us a tour of the place, and it was definitely a lot nicer than it had seemed. Tour concluded, we changed into bathing suits, picked up glasses of cool water with lemon and cucumber slices, and went for a soak in the whirlpool. I perched on the edge and only put my legs in to keep my tattoo dry.

After everyone had commented on my new bear, which even Meredith said was "pretty cute", Marian regaled us with the lies her last boss had told her. Apparently he'd promised to give her a promotion, a raise, a new office. In the end, all she got was an indecent proposal, and then a pink slip when she refused to "put herself out for the company" as she called it.

"Do you guys think you're honest? I didn't think it mattered all that much before this, but now I do."

Allyson said thoughtfully, "I've always been good with the major stuff, but I tend not to worry so much about the little lies. You know, the 'yes, that dress looks great on you' and 'ooh, what a lovely haircut' kind of things."

I was about to agree with Allyson when Meredith said, "I don't lie."

"Ever?" Marian said, looking doubtful.

"Ever," Meredith said firmly. "It backfired on me when I was seventeen and I've never done it since."

"Ever?" Marian said again.

Meredith splashed a little water in her direction, and said, "Never ever."

"How do you manage that?" I asked. "Aren't there times when it's easier to lie?"

"For sure," said Meredith. "But I don't."

Marian said, "Well, what on earth happened when you were seventeen to make you the truth queen?"

Apparently Meredith had been in the school band, with practices after school twice a week. One day, the teacher had decided to cancel practice (probably just unable to face two hours of loud music and louder complaining). Meredith had therefore headed off to the mall with a few friends.

At dinner that night, her mother had oh-so-casually asked her, "How was band practice today?" Meredith had, for some inexplicable reason, lied and said it was fine. Her mother was instantly livid.

"Then how come I saw you walking to the mall during band time?"

Meredith had then needed to explain that practice had actually been cancelled. Naturally her mother was less than convinced by this explanation, and such phrases as, "Why did you lie then?" and "How am I supposed to trust you?" and "What else have you lied about?" were frequent, although unwelcome, guests in Meredith's home for the next few weeks.

"Why *did* you lie?" Marian asked.

"I don't *know*," Meredith snapped, and I suddenly could picture her as a seventeen year old, furious with herself.

More calmly, she went on. "It just sort of came out. As soon as I said it, I knew it was stupid, but it was too late. Since then, I have never lied again, even to myself, so I can be sure it won't happen again."

We sat silently simmering, each lost in our own thoughts.

Did I lie to myself?

Uh, yeah. All the time. I told myself I was losing weight when I'd really just stretched out the elastic on my favorite lounging sweat pants. I told myself I would read real literature, but only bought those books when I could get a discount by buying an extra book to go along with my Jilly Cooper ones. I kept promising myself to think about my marriage but then didn't do it.

I lied to Lou too. I'd once told him I was home sick with the flu when I really

just didn't want to come in. I told him all the time that I was 'just finishing up a project' when the truth was that I hadn't even looked at it since he'd dropped it on my desk.

I didn't lie to Ian, though, or to Larissa. Not much to Larissa, anyhow, and only because knowing about Kegan would upset her. So none of this stuff was a big deal. Nobody got hurt by my little tiny miniscule lies. Nobody cried or lost their jobs or missed a deadline.

So wasn't it okay?

My reverie was interrupted by the arrival of a beautiful Swedish girl. She didn't have to say she was Swedish, it was written all over her. Long blonde braids, perfect peaches-and-cream skin.

"Candice?" she asked, with just a trace of an accent.

"That's me."

"I'm Annika. I'll be doing your treatment today."

I scrambled out of the whirlpool and wrapped myself quickly in a towel, not wanting to have to compare myself to her sleek sexy body.

"Chocolate wrap, right?"

"Yes."

"Have you had a wrap before?"

"No," I admitted, feeling strangely guilty about this lapse in my beauty education.

"You'll love it," she enthused. "I'll be smoothing chocolate and essential oils all over your skin, and then wrapping you up in warm linens to rest and relax."

She sounded as though she was quoting right out of the brochure. "Sounds great."

"Oh, it is."

We arrived in a small treatment room. There was a small bed and a stool in front of a tiny table laden with more oils and potions than I'd ever seen in one place, and that was it. There wasn't room in there for much more, really. Annika dimmed the lights and gestured to the bed. I perched on the edge, not sure what I was supposed to do.

"Now," she announced grandly, "for your journey of the senses."

I was a little bit taken aback, but soon found out that she simply meant for me to sniff an endless array of oils and choose three to put into my wrap.

Ten minutes later, with peppermint, satsuma orange and strawberry selected (an odd combination, but they went together well) Annika instructed me to take off all my clothes and slip under the sheet on the bed.

"All?" I asked, trying to pretend I was just confirming. Being naked in front of a stranger didn't strike me as the best way to relax.

"Yes, all," she said. "Otherwise your clothes will be ruined with the chocolate, and we don't want that, do we?"

We sure did, if it meant we wouldn't have to be naked.

"I just got a tattoo yesterday," I said. "Should I keep my clothes on to cover it?"

Annika demanded, and got, a showing of my lovely little bear, then smoothed a piece of plastic wrap over it and secured it with some medical tape.

"Happens all the time," she said. "That'll protect it. Now, strip!" She smiled at me and left the room.

So I stripped and tucked myself into the bed. It was actually quite comfortable.

Annika returned, bringing with her a large bowl from which the scent of chocolate drifted. She went to her little table and added the oils. Mixing it together with a big wooden spoon, she gave me a quick rundown on what would be happening.

"I spread this all over you, and then wrap you up nice and comfy in the sheets. Then you just rest here for twenty minutes or so, and then I come and unwrap

you. You take a nice warm shower to get the chocolate off, and you're all done."

Twenty minutes of lying there. I figured she would probably give me a magazine or two to pass the time.

I struggled mightily not to be embarrassed as she brushed the chocolate mixture all over me, front and back, reasoning that she'd seen many naked people before and it was just part of her job.

Once I was covered, she wrapped me up, mummy-like, in the sheets, trapping my arms against my sides. Flipping me over onto my back, she patted me gently on the top of my head, pretty much the only thing not covered in chocolate.

"Have a nice rest. I'll see you in a while."

She dimmed the lights and closed the door behind her as I was trying to figure out whether it'd be worthwhile to ask her to drape a magazine over my face so I'd at least have one page to read.

I was alone.

Alone with nothing to do but marinate in chocolate and think.

Sunday, August 14th

I am standing by the side of a long country road. I know that I am in Italy, even though I've never been there before. A funeral passes by. An old lady, small and wrinkled and somehow inherently Italian, stands near me, crying and wailing with more misery than I would have thought one person could express. Clearly someone very important has died.

I find myself rising away from the road, but the wailing continues, and grows steadily louder. Louder and more pathetic...

My eyes still closed, I realized that I was snuggled down deep in my bed. The wailing, though, was even louder than it had been before. The pain, the absolute desperation in it, was overwhelming.

The hurt... the sadness...

The cat!

It was Ninja, crying out his agony and devastation. Over what, I had no idea, since his life seemed to be just about perfect. My eyes drifted open and I managed to focus them on the alarm clock.

4:44 in the morning.

On a Sunday.

I rolled onto my side so that I could get out of bed, and found myself face to face with the cat. The wailing, which had stopped briefly while I was trying to return to the land of the living, started again when he realized I was aware of his presence.

I put my hand under his chin and stared into his eyes.

"I thought someone had died. If you don't hush up right now, someone *is* going to die."

I glared at him for another moment, and then he pulled away from me and walked to the end of the bed. He stared back at me for a moment, with the kind of disdain that only a cat can really pull off, and then haughtily jumped from the bed. The effect was somewhat spoiled by the grunt he made when he hit the ground. Fat cats can't jump.

I heard Ninja's claws clicking away on the hardwood, and drifted slowly back to sleep, the last thought in my head, "Why didn't I just get a hamster?"

At a more civilized hour, I got up and surveyed the house. Things were coming along quite well. I had a bit of time to kill before my lunch with Larissa, which she'd asked to have later than usual since she was getting her hair colored, so I looked around for a nice easy job to do to make the house better.

Wandering up to our bedroom, I found the job. When we looked at the house before we bought it, I had dreams of sitting outside on the balcony outside the bedroom with a drink and a good book. Unfortunately, the previous owners had covered the balcony's floor with a very unattractive carpet, of a color that reminded me of the place where brown and puke-green go to die, which didn't make it a nice place to sit and relax.

Ian and I weren't innocent either. On the balcony as well were our window screens (which we took off once when we were feeling particularly energetic and decided to wash the windows; the windows never got washed and we never replaced the screens), a suitcase that Ninja had mistaken for his litter box, a bathmat that Ninja had mistaken for his litter box, and the old headboard for our bed. We'd bought a nicer one but never quite got around to throwing out the old one. Needless to say, we hadn't sat outside on the balcony since we moved in over a year ago.

I bundled up the accidental litter boxes in garbage bags and hauled them out of the bedroom, down the stairs and out the back door. After I stashed them near our garbage can, I went back inside, up the stairs and into the bedroom. A lovely twenty minutes of attempted screen installation ensued, but I did eventually win out and the screens were returned to their former resting places. By this point, I needed a rest myself, but I pressed on.

The headboard presented an enormous challenge. It was made of very heavy plywood with a cheap-looking wood veneer over top, and I had no idea how to get the beast out of the bedroom, never mind down the stairs.

I poked and prodded it assessingly, and realized that part of it was actually rotting away due to having been outside on the balcony through a Canadian winter. I pulled at the wood and heard a slight splintering sound. Off I went to the basement, returning with a hammer and a crow bar.

It took me nearly half an hour, but I managed to reduce the headboard to a collection of cheap-looking-wood-veneer-covered-very-heavy-plywood boards. These I stuffed into several garbage bags. I put them by the garbage can with the previous load, and returned to the balcony to face my nemesis.

I gingerly caught hold of a corner of the revolting carpet and began to pull it upwards. I'd expected it to be glued down, but it moved easily and I was able to pull it all off, revealing the dustiest gray concrete I'd ever seen and what appeared to be the world's entire population of dead ladybugs. I swept the floor five times and eventually managed to get rid of all the ladybugs and most of the dust. Ecstatic, I wanted to rest on my laurels, or at least on a lawn chair, but we'd never bought furniture for the balcony since it had always been such a mess. Now that it was clean, it was time to go shopping.

A flash of brilliance hit me. Ikea! I would just pop into Ikea, grab some funky European chairs, and come home. Ikea was only fifteen minutes away; I could be done in an hour round-trip.

Those who do not learn from past shopping trips are doomed to repeat them.

One hour later I was dragging a cart filled to the top with Ikea bits and pieces, and I was only halfway through the store. I had yet to see any outdoor furniture and I'd already collected at least two hundred dollars worth of stuff. There should be signs posted at the doors of Ikea stores: "Abandon hope and solvency, all ye who enter here". However they say that in Swedish.

I eventually found myself some very neat chairs and footstools to match, along with several pots of strawberry plants and petunias, paid the exorbitant bill, and hauled my cart out to the car.

Back home, I made several trips to get everything upstairs and laid it all out ceremoniously on the balcony. It looked good. Really good. I was a genius.

I checked my watch and realized in horror that I was about to be a late genius, late for lunch with Larissa. Glancing into the mirror, I discovered that I was filthy after my wrestling with the balcony and plants.

One lightning-fast shower later, I threw on a red top with beaded fringe on the hem and a short white flared skirt, swiped my soggy hair back into a french twist, and took off for the restaurant.

Larissa wasn't there when I arrived. I was terrified. If she'd arrived, and left because I was so late, I would be unlikely to survive the fallout. I would indeed be late. The late Candice Warburton.

As I sat at our table with my martini, shuddering inside, Larissa suddenly rushed in, her hair even more perfect than usual and a rich shimmering blonde. "I'm so sorry I'm so late! Have you been waiting long?"

I smiled, trying to hide my relief. "No, not really. Don't worry about it. Your hair looks great."

She smiled back and sat down across from me. "Thanks. So," she said casually, "What's new?"

I couldn't help the smirk creeping across my face.

"What? What's going on?"

I leaned in towards her and whispered, "I got a tattoo."

She laughed. "Oh, you did not."

I sat back, raised my eyebrows, and waited.

Her eyes widened. "You did? Oh my God, let me see."

"I can't show you here."

"Why not, where'd you put it? Am I about to be traumatized? Okay, fine, let's go to the bathroom."

In the bathroom, I lifted the back of my shirt with great ceremony. Larissa gave a low whistle.

"Wow. *That* is cool."

"Isn't it?" I said with glee, twisting around to take a look at it in the mirror.

"How much did it hurt?"

"Honestly, it wasn't all that bad."

Larissa looked at me disbelievingly.

"Really, it wasn't. The fear of getting it done was actually a lot worse than actually getting it done."

"If you say so. Hey, can I touch it?"

"Yeah, it doesn't really hurt now. Wait, are your hands clean?"

Larissa rolled her eyes at me, then stretched out a cautious finger and touched the outline of the bear. Snapping her finger away, she said, "I can feel it. Is it supposed to be raised up like that?"

"It's still healing. When it's done, it'll be smooth."

Shaking her head, Larissa followed me back to our table.

"I didn't think you had it in you," she said as we got settled again. "Do you think Ian'll like it?"

"I don't know. Hope so."

"Well, it's Ian. He won't be a jerk about it even if he doesn't. Oh, hey, speaking of jerks, you won't believe this."

I just might.

"Kegan never called Fiona, so she finally called him herself. She hates calling guys. Figures they should be chasing her."

She laughed, then added, "They usually do, actually. If he's trying to make her want him more, he's doing a great job."

"So what happened?"

"They talked for a little while then she told him she had to go. She didn't want him thinking she had all the time in the world to spend on him."

"When are they going out?" I did my best to make my voice sound only mildly interested.

"They're not. He called her back on Friday and said he's too busy right now to have time for a new relationship."

I looked into my martini glass, trying to hide my relief. Fiona wouldn't be good for him, I was sure of it. I'd told him he should go out with her, but I was glad he'd decided not to. When I thought I wouldn't show Larissa my feelings, I looked up. "Poor Fiona. How'd she react?"

Larissa looked at me, and her eyes widened. "You already knew."

I froze.

"You *did*! What did he tell you?"

I gave in. "We talked about it on Friday at work. He said he didn't know what to do. I told him he should ask her out."

Larissa said, "But he didn't."

"Apparently not. But I told him to."

I was telling the truth, and Larissa seemed to realize it. She wasn't completely satisfied, though. "You wouldn't have been upset if he *had* gone out with her, would you?"

I shook my head. "Nothing to do with me." I wouldn't have been upset, at least, if he'd dated someone who wasn't Fiona. She wasn't good enough for him.

"How much are you seeing him?"

"Daily. Not always all day, but daily."

"And he's behaving himself?"

I nodded. "We spend the whole day talking about tiles and paint and that sort of thing."

"Never outside of work, right? Other than that coffee shop thing."

"Why would I?"

Larissa raised her eyebrows. "That doesn't answer the question."

I couldn't tell her about the Wonderland visit; she'd skin me alive. Her eyes narrowed and I had to say something. "He does want to take me out for dinner next week to thank me for my work."

"But you're not going, right?"

"I'm not sure yet. Probably not."

"*Probably* not? Are you crazy?"

"It's rude not to go, isn't it?"

"Is it just you two?"

That was a good question. I'd assumed it was, but it might not be. "I don't know. I doubt it, now that you mention it."

Clearly tiring of talking about Kegan, Larissa said, "That's not so bad then. Hey, you didn't tell me about the spa trip. How'd it go?"

"I may not be cut out to be a lady of leisure. I was all wrapped up and bored out of my mind. Couldn't even read."

"Nothing to do at all?"

"Not a thing. Well, I guess I could have counted the ceiling tiles."

"Could have or did?"

Larissa knew me too well.

"I did count them," I admitted. "Seven times, I believe. And then I tried to figure out how big the tiles were so I could figure out how big the room was."

Larissa laughed. "And then what?"

"When the cloths and the chocolate started to cool, I got itchy."

"Itchy?"

"Like all the mosquitoes on the planet were in there with me. Itchy and cold and clammy and oh, so terribly itchy."

"What did you do?"

"I wiggled around trying to scratch myself, but there was no way to scratch most of the itchy spots that way. I nearly fell off the table."

Larissa was laughing now, but trying to smother it. "Sounds terrible."

"Indeed it was, so quit that giggling."

"I'm sorry, it's just... "

"I know, it's funny now. At the time it was nasty."

I'd started calling Annika, quietly at first and then eventually at the top of my lungs. No response.

"Then I started wondering what would happen if I had a heart attack or something in there. There was obviously nobody around to hear me, so nobody would be able to save me. I could be dead, there on the table, covered in chocolate, and nobody would even know."

Larissa was now laughing so hard that the tears were rolling down her cheeks. "I can see the headline now," she choked out. "'Woman found dead, covered in chocolate.'"

"'Police are baffled'," I joined in, "'but did say she smelled delicious'."

"So, don't keep me in suspense. How'd you escape the dread chocolate wrap?"

"I shut my eyes tight and tried to imagine myself sitting on the couch at home with a book. I made the whole thing as real as I could, so that I could manage at least some sort of an escape."

"Good plan," said Larissa, still snickering.

"When Annika came back, she said that I'd only gotten itchy because I was fighting the relaxation. I said, 'No, I think it's because I'm covered in cold wet cloths', and she got mad."

"So, no more wraps?"

"No more wraps," I confirmed. "I'll probably go to the spa again, but only to do something where I can still read at the same time. Or watch TV, or talk to someone. Anything but just sitting there trying to relax."

"Do you even know how?" Larissa asked. "I'm not sure I've ever seen you relaxed."

"What do you mean? I'm relaxed now."

Larissa raised an eyebrow and grabbed my hand. I looked at her in surprise.

"Quit tapping your fingers on the table, then."

"I wasn't."

"Oh, really. Sure sounded like it. And looked like it. And *was* it."

I pulled my hand away and wrapped it around my coffee cup.

"I don't know," I said slowly. "I guess I read, and I take baths sometimes, as long as I have a book that can go in with me, and I watch TV. I crochet then too, though. I get bored just watching."

"Don't you just ever sit and think and let your mind wander?"

"It's too little to be out alone," I joked.

Larissa said, "No, I'm serious. I get some of my best ideas just sitting someplace quiet and letting my mind drift around to whatever it wants to think about."

I shook my head. "I've never done it."

"Try it some time."

When I went home, once again having eaten way too much. I curled up on the couch, automatically reaching for a book.

No, we would try this Larissa's way.

I put the book down and looked around my house. *Let my mind wander where it wants to go.*

I wondered what was on TV. I reached for the remote control, and then pulled away. I managed to stick it out for ten painful minutes, and then I had to give up. During that time, I'd been nearly as itchy as I'd been at the spa.

Maybe Annika was on to something. Maybe it was because I couldn't relax that I got so itchy.

But did it really matter? All this mind wandering stuff, it just seemed dangerous to me. Who knew what I'd think about if I could think about anything?

I picked up my crocheting and lost myself in the stitches and the caress of the yarn over my fingers. The shawl was beautiful, but it wasn't progressing as quickly as I'd hoped, and I did want it finished by the time Ian came home.

He'd said he'd been doing a lot of thinking. What about? Could I ask him when he called? If our last phone call were any indication, he wouldn't tell me a thing if I *did* ask him.

In contrast to Kegan, who'd been almost immediately open with me about his loss and his pain. Why couldn't my husband open up like that? My psychology degree had taught me that there's no one right way to grieve, but I couldn't help preferring Kegan's method to Ian's.

I'd talked through my in-laws' deaths repeatedly with Larissa and Tasha in the first few weeks, and then I'd felt more able to move on. Still sad, of course, still sorry they were gone, but closer to being ready to continue my own life. Kegan seemed to be handling George's death the same way, by talking to me about it, and we were becoming friends as a result.

Although I'd never reacted to a friend the way I'd reacted to Kegan's flashed stomach.

I carried on crocheting and thinking, making good progress on the former and chasing my own tail on the latter, until the phone rang. The connection was a little better this time, and Ian seemed easier and more at peace.

"I'm sorry about last time," he said as soon as we'd exchanged pleasantries. "There were tons of people in here and--"

"It's okay," I said, his apology making me uncomfortable for some reason. "I probably wouldn't say 'I love you' at work either."

"You don't love me at work?"

I tried to imitate his joking tone, but I couldn't quite manage it. Why was I so tense now that he was relaxed? "I do love you. Just probably wouldn't say it at work."

"Gotcha. How's the yarn doing?"

"I love it. It's being really good and it's looking gorgeous."

"What are you making?"

"You'll have to wait and see."

"I can't wait. Tell me now."

Ian's flirty tone was more than just relaxed; it was as if his parents' death and the aftermath had never happened. He'd gone back to how he'd sounded before.

"Not a chance," I said. "You didn't tell me it was there, so I won't tell you what I'm making."

He laughed. "That makes no sense, babe."

Babe? Again, I hadn't heard that in months. "Too bad," I said, then took a deep breath and added, "You sound different," before I could change my mind.

After a lengthy pause, he said, "I feel different. I told you I've been thinking, and I think I'm doing pretty well getting stuff worked out. I guess that's why that suggestion you made got me so mad."

The suggestion that we get counseling. "But I don't have any idea what you're doing out there," I said.

"What do you mean?"

The flicker of annoyance in his tone surprised me. "I just meant I didn't know you were thinking. Why, what did you--"

"Sorry," he said. "I thought you were saying I wasn't telling you enough about things out here."

Well, that too but I didn't want to bring it up now. "No, you are, although I'd love to know more. I guess you can tell me when you get home."

"I will, but there's not much to tell. What about you? What are you doing besides crocheting?"

"Not much," I said. Not much I could tell him, anyhow. I was keeping the gym a

secret, I didn't want to tell him what I was making with his yarn, and I definitely couldn't tell him I was going out for dinner with Kegan.

Or could I? It wasn't really that big a deal, and it might not even be just us, and it wasn't a date even if it was just us. I could tell him with no worries if it were Larissa, so why not Kegan?

I knew why. I didn't tell him. "I'm working a lot, and I did Larissa's makeup inventory again this week."

"Did you do it right this time?"

I'd so missed his teasing, and now that I had it back it felt uncomfortable. Was there no pleasing me? "I think so," I said, and told him about the client's use of me as a model stand-in.

"Do we get a copy of the pictures?"

"I don't think they took any."

"I don't have any good pictures of you, and I need one," he said. "I'll take a bunch when I get home and we can pick the best one."

Maybe I should go and get pictures taken while he was away to surprise him. I didn't photograph well, though, never had, and I hated the whole process besides.

"I know you hate having your picture taken," he said, "but I've really wished I had one out here. People were asking about you and I didn't have one. Hey, can you email me one of our wedding pictures?"

I loved those pictures. Some had been bad, but overall they were the best ever taken of me. "Sure, I'll do that after we get off the phone."

He sighed. "Which kind of has to be now. There are people waiting."

"I don't want you to go," I said without realizing the words were coming.

"I don't want to go either, but I have to. I love you."

I heard, faintly, applause coming through the phone. "Are they clapping for you?"

"Yes, because they're *morons*," Ian said, laughing. "Ignore them. I love you, and I can't wait to come home."

"I love you too," I said. "Two weeks to go."

"I'll be home before you know it. Bye, Candice."

"Bye," I said, and he hung up. I put the phone down and leaned my head back against the couch. I wanted him home, of course I did. But I'd still be working with Kegan by that point, and how was that ever going to work out?

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacatocks@hotmail.com

Subject: Picture attached

I made it a little smaller so it wouldn't tie up your Internet connection for too long. If it's too small, let me know.

Talking to you today was great. I bet next weekend'll be even better.

Love,

C.

Monday, August 15th

My day was a whirlwind. Deciding what to wear for dinner with Kegan took me so long I was at the gym fifteen minutes later than I'd meant to be, and even though my workout left me pleasantly tired rather than exhausted, my whole day felt fifteen minutes behind from then on.

We were running late on at least three projects, and Lou kept dropping new things on my desk and telling me that they were my top priority, so I was constantly switching from one task to another and getting next to nothing done.

When I had ten top priorities, I went after him and tried to get him to take a stand on which one I needed to do first.

"All of them," was the decidedly unhelpful response.

In desperate need of a break, I decided to go for lunch. A short one, of course, since we were so busy. I was gone for fifteen minutes, and came back to another three top priority jobs. Lucky thirteen. I shuffled them all up, put on my headphones, started up my Meat Loaf CD, and just kept pounding away at my keyboard.

When I finally lifted my head from my work just before five o'clock, I had a stiff neck, aching fingers from typing, and ten finished top priorities. I presented them to Lou.

"Nice work, Candice. What about the other six?"

"Three."

"Check your inbox."

Lovely.

"Can you finish them tonight? I'm planning to come in early tomorrow."

I wasn't meeting Kegan until seven, but I didn't want to just keel over and give Lou all my panicking time. I made a contemplative face.

"After five, you get paid double, of course."

I smiled. "For you, Lou, I'll do it."

Lou raised an eyebrow, not convinced in the least, then he laughed. "Candice, I don't care why you do it so long as it's done."

Once the office was empty after five, I was able to get the work done very quickly, freed of the distractions of conversations and ringing phones.

Plus, there was no way for Lou to add things to my inbox when he wasn't in. Although I did make sure to not check my email, just in case he thought of one

more thing.

At about six-fifteen, I finished the last task. Filled with pride and satisfaction, I pirouetted with the project files across the floor, singing "It's Rainin' Men" for no apparent reason. The projects didn't seem to mind. I deposited them on Lou's desk, gave them a friendly pat, and then terror swept over me.

Kegan.

I'd almost forgotten that we were meeting, buried as I'd been in work. But now it was all I could think about, and the nervousness that should have been spread over the entire day hit me in a sudden surge.

I pulled out my makeup bag and hairbrush, held them for a second, and then dropped them back into my purse. Why was I worried about how I looked for Kegan? It didn't matter.

I went around turning off lights and making sure the office was ready to be locked up, but my makeup and brush seemed to be calling to me. "Candice? We know you can hear us. Don't you want Kegan to think you look gorgeous?"

"No," I answered them firmly in my head. Not out loud, of course. That would be crazy.

"We think you do," they crooned. "He used to look at you like you were a supermodel, remember? Wouldn't it be nice to make him look at you that way again?"

"No," I thought again with much less firmness.

"Are you sure?"

"No," I admitted to myself. I wasn't sure. I did want him to think I looked good, to regret having traded me for some beautiful bimbo. I picked up the makeup bag and hairbrush again and took them into the bathroom to inspect the damage a day's work had caused to my appearance.

Granted, getting dressed in the morning had taken a ridiculous amount of time, but the dark purple skirt and lighter purple top I'd finally chosen looked good on me, especially with my all-time favorite necklace, a glass pendant in swirling

shades of purple, blue, and green with a polar bear's outline etched into it. The necklace, my wedding gift from Ian, never failed to earn me at least one compliment every time I wore it, and its weight at my neck was comforting.

From the neck down, everything was fine. From the neck up, I was slightly pale and a little ruffled. After I'd redone my ponytail and fluffed some blush onto my cheeks, I stood back and eyed myself critically, then added a little more blush. Oops, too much. I toned my cheeks down with powder, smoothed on some lip gloss, and repeated the 'eyeing myself critically'.

I would do.

I straightened up my desk, taking a last look around to make sure I had everything I'd need for the evening, and left the office. Lou had locked the door from the outside before he left, but I tried it to make sure.

Then I walked the three blocks to the restaurant, feeling rather like a condemned prisoner making her final trip down Death Row.

"Dead scared woman walking."

I'd wanted to be late so I wouldn't have to wait for Kegan. Unfortunately, I arrived a few minutes early. I didn't want to look too eager, so I slipped into the bookstore next door. The washrooms were right by the door, so I went in and checked out my tattoo. It was healing incredibly well; it didn't seem to be scabbing at all and it hadn't even itched as badly as Spike had said it might.

I straightened my clothes and pulled myself together mentally as well. The bear and I could do this. I was meeting Kegan for dinner, not running away with him or, God forbid, going to bed with him. No big deal. My mind tried to wander off to thoughts of going to bed with Kegan, but I hauled it away from that minefield. We were not going there.

I checked my lip gloss again, touched my neck and wrists with my little vial of Christian Dior's "Hypnotic Poison", which smelled like dangerous vanilla, and headed out.

I was halfway to the door when a new Marian Keyes novel caught my eye. I picked it up to take a look and decided it needed to come home with me. Turning around to go to the cash register, I suddenly found myself face to face with

Kegan.

"Hey," I said in what I hoped was a suitably casual voice.

"Hey there," he responded, sounding even more casual than I'd tried to be.

"Figured you might be in here. Found a book?"

"Yeah, but I can get it later. We can go."

"No worries, take your time."

Kegan followed me to the cash register. I paid for my new friend and tucked it away in my purse.

"Your purses are still huge, I see."

I felt my cheeks grow warm. "Well, I need the room--"

"For novels. I remember."

His eyes met mine as he smiled, and a flash of desire swept over me. It was those damned eyes. Why couldn't he be cross eyed or something, instead of having those eyes that I kept losing myself in? I managed, somehow, to look away. "I'm ready to go. You?"

In answer, he turned and headed for the front door. I followed, half annoyed that he hadn't taken my arm to guide me along and half relieved. If just meeting his eyes had such an impact on me, what would a touch do?

I resolved not to find out.

That resolution lasted all of about thirty seconds. When we left the store, he turned to me, and somehow I was in the midst of a hug before I realized it was happening. His arms were across my tattoo and I flinched, but the pressure didn't hurt.

We held each other for a brief moment then he gently released me. To my shock and horror, I didn't return the favor and kept my arms wrapped around him. I felt his start of surprise, and then he squeezed me once again and let go. This time I did too. He smiled as though he hadn't noticed what I'd done, but I knew he had.

What was I doing?

Shark Bait was all smoky mirrors and black enamel, dark and mysterious. Kegan had made a reservation for us, and our table was in a quiet corner, isolated from the rest by an enormous fish tank. It felt like dining in the Caribbean.

Once we were settled, he reached across the small table and touched my necklace. "That's gorgeous. Dichroic glass, right?"

I stared at him. "Yeah. How'd you know that?"

He looked uncomfortable. "My ex-girlfriend was a glass artist. Actually, that's the kind of piece she might have made. Where'd you get it?"

"Ian gave it to me when we got married, so I don't know."

"Ah," he said. We sat in silence for a moment, then he added, "He's got good taste." Something in his tone suggested he was talking about more than just Ian's taste in jewelry, and my cheeks warmed.

"Candy, I really appreciate your listening to me go on about George. It helped."

"You didn't go on," I said, "but I'm glad I could help."

"I guess you and Ian talked a lot about his parents' death," he said. "Must be good to have someone to talk to about anything and everything." He paused. "Well, other than your cancer test, I guess."

I nodded, unable to make myself say a word. Anything I could say would be a barefaced lie. Kegan raised his eyebrows, but mercifully left it alone.

When the waiter arrived, Kegan ordered for both of us, including a bottle of white wine. I'd never had someone order for me before, and I wasn't sure I liked it. True, he'd asked me what I wanted first, but...

We chatted idly, mostly about the progress of his restaurant, until the wine arrived. He poured us each a glass and raised his to me. "Cheers, Candy."

"Cheers," I echoed, and drank half the glass in one go.

He filled my glass again. "Thirsty, are we?"

"Hard day at work."

"Oh, really?"

I nodded, and told him about Lou and the top priorities. He laughed, and told me about the arrival that day of five times the required number of granite tiles for the front foyer. We traded stories, and drank wine, and laughed more than I had in a long time.

We didn't laugh so much, though, when we touched on the subject of our own relationship. A touchy subject indeed.

"I was devastated when you left me, you know," he said.

"You were not." I set my glass down hard to emphasize my words, sloshing a little onto the table.

He topped up my glass again; I'd already lost count of how many times he'd done it. "I was."

"You were out with that Danica girl the next weekend, so nice try."

He had the decency to look somewhat embarrassed. "I know I was, but it was supposed to make you jealous."

"Really? That was why you went out with her?"

"Why else? She was dumber than dirt and duller than...ummm..."

"Dirt?" I supplied dryly, loving this.

"No, that's insulting to dirt." We both laughed, but then our eyes met and the laughter faded away.

"You really hurt me," I said quietly, still staring into his eyes.

"I know," he said, "and I'm sorry." He reached out and took my hand in his. "I was wrong. You were beautiful then and you're beautiful now."

I dropped my eyes in embarrassment.

"You are, you know. I really did hope you'd forgotten. It was such a stupid thing to say, and so cruel. Candy, I... is there any chance you could forgive me, and we could be friends?"

Friends. A little voice in my head, sounding strangely like Larissa, scoffed, but I looked back at him, and realized he meant it. "I think I can," I managed.

"I'm so glad."

I looked down at my glass of wine, not sure what to say. He brushed his thumb lightly over the back of my hand, and a shudder tore through me. I jerked my hand away.

"Candy," he began, but the waiter arrived right then with our salads and Kegan never finished his sentence.

Probably just as well.

The only bad part of the evening came when the waiter mixed up our orders as he delivered our dinners to the table. It was the right food, he just put Kegan's plate down in front of me.

I was about to switch the plates when Kegan hissed, "You screwed up."

The waiter flushed a deep brick red. "I'm sorry, sir, I--"

"I don't want to hear explanations. Fix it."

Kegan sat with his arms folded as the waiter meekly rearranged the plates and fled. I tried to catch the waiter's eye to smile him an apology, but he wouldn't look up.

"If something like that happens at Steel," Kegan said, picking up his fork and casting a disapproving eye over his meal, "heads will roll."

I toyed with my wine glass. "Really? Why?"

"Why? Because people are paying for the full experience, and everything has to be perfect. I don't want my customers to have to put up with incompetence."

"He was hardly incompetent," I said, doing my best not to sound confrontational.

My best must not have been good enough, because Kegan put his fork down sharply on his plate and said, "Listen, Candy, I *will* expect my staff to do things properly. If someone does something against me once, they won't get a second chance."

I bit my lip, not sure what to say. I didn't think the waiter had done anything against us, but Kegan clearly didn't want to discuss it any more, and what good would it do anyone for me to keep fighting?

Kegan took a very deep breath and smiled at me. "Let's just forget it, okay? Let's talk about something else."

"Okay," I said, eager to move on. "How are your parents?"

He grimaced. "You sure know how to pick conversation killers."

"I liked your parents," I protested.

"Yeah, well, they don't like me so much right now."

"Why not?"

"I left law, Candy. Why do *you* think they might not like me?"

"But it's what you've always wanted to do."

He nodded. "And what *they've* always wanted me to do is make lots of money and give them something to brag about with their friends."

I took a sip of my wine. I'd never thought his parents were like that, but he should know.

"That sucks," I said.

He gave me a bitter smile. "Totally." Then he asked me my opinion of the window treatments he'd chosen for his restaurant, and we returned to safer

conversational waters.

For a few minutes, anyhow. After we'd ordered dessert, he said, "Candy, feel free to tell me to shut up, but--"

"Shut up."

I laughed, but he didn't, and I sobered quickly. Stopped laughing, anyhow; we were nearing the bottom of the bottle of wine and I'd had most of it myself.

"I was going to say," he said, "I know someone must have told you your in-laws' deaths were your fault, and I just wanted to tell you they're not."

I stared at him. "If I'd just told you George's death wasn't your fault, would that have worked?"

He looked confused, and I went on. "Because you just telling me that doesn't make me feel better. It *was* my fault."

Kegan put his hand over mine again. A flash of heat ripped through me, strengthened by the wine, but I didn't pull away. It felt too good. "It wasn't. They were in the wrong place at--"

"If Ian hadn't married me, they wouldn't have died."

He looked nearly as shocked as I felt. I hadn't said it out loud before, and the words seemed to hang in the air, ugly and menacing. At last, he said, "Who told you that?"

"It's just obvious," I said, wishing I hadn't told him.

"But that's like saying if Ian hadn't been born they wouldn't have died. If you go back far enough, it's always someone's fault."

"And this time it's mine."

Kegan gripped my hand in both of his. "I can see why you think that. But only because they were out shopping for you, not because you... married Ian. That makes no sense." He paused, then went on. "I don't know Ian, but if someone said that about my wife I'd make damned sure they never said it again."

"Yeah, but what if--" I cut myself off. I didn't want to tell him.

"What if what?" He looked at me for a second, then his eyes widened. "Candy, who told you it was your fault because he'd married you? Was it *Ian*?"

I looked down at the table, misery welling up, choking me. A tear fell, then another.

He let go of my hand and pulled his chair around so he was sitting beside me, then wrapped his arm around my shoulders. When I turned to face him, he slid his other arm around me too, and I pressed my forehead against his shoulder. "It's *not* your fault," he said into my ear. "It's tragic, but it's not your fault. I can't believe he said that."

"I don't think he meant to," I said through my tears. "It was the day they died, and he was really upset, and--"

"I don't care when it was, he shouldn't have said it. And I can't believe you're defending him."

I pushed myself back from Kegan. "I have to defend him, he's my husband."

"You don't have to defend him if he says something stupid."

"Oh, so *you're* telling me not to defend someone who says something stupid? Smart girl, beautiful girl? Ringing any bells?"

We stared at each other for a second, tension building, before he said, "Okay, good point. But still..."

More quietly, I said, "I really don't think he meant it. I know he was just upset. It was a horrible day all around."

"But he apologized for it later, right?"

I shook my head. "We've never talked about it."

He frowned. "But it's been months. You know it's not your fault, right?"

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I do know it, but Ian's still right. If he

hadn't married me, they wouldn't have died."

Kegan held my gaze for a long moment, then said, "You know what, I guess that's technically true. But it's not the point."

"Then what is the point?"

"Do you think they were happy going out to buy that present?"

Tears rose again, but they were different this time. "Definitely. They'd left a voice mail for Ian's brother saying how excited they were that the rug had finally been made and how they were sure I'd love it."

Kegan took my hand again. "Do you think they'd blame you?"

I bit my lip. No, they wouldn't. They'd never been that sort of people.

He waited, not speaking, until I said, "No."

"No what?"

"No, they wouldn't blame me."

"Where's the rug now?"

I told him, and he said, "When you get home, bring it up from the basement."

"I don't know," I began, but he said, "Bring it up. Enjoy it, love it, and remember them. "

I looked into his eyes, warm and concerned, and knew he was right. I didn't know how Ian would feel about it, but I'd ask him. And if he was okay with it... "I will."

We smiled at each other. "Thank you," I said, feeling awkward. "It does help to talk about it."

"Didn't Larissa ever tell you any of this?"

I licked my lips. "She doesn't know what he said."

"But you told me," he said, giving my hand a squeeze. "I'm honored. And a little surprised, frankly."

So was I. I explained how I hadn't wanted to color Larissa's impression of Ian, and he said, "Well, I still think he shouldn't have said it, and he definitely should have apologized, but I'm really only worried about you. Are you feeling any better?"

"You know, I am," I said, and he grinned at me.

"Glad to hear it. Would dessert help?"

"Dessert *always* helps," I said, feeling suddenly giddy.

After dinner was over, we had a little tussle to see who would pay, which he won on account of his longer arms.

"Anyhow," he said, pulling a platinum credit card out of his wallet and handing it to the waiter, "I hounded you until you said yes to tonight, so it's the least I can do."

"You didn't hound me," I said, even though he sort of had.

"Then you wanted to come?"

How to answer *that*? "You're a client. Lou expects me to make the clients happy."

"So you go out for dinner with clients a lot?"

"No," I admitted. "You're the first."

Kegan shot me a wink. I winked back. I'd never done that before, and we burst into laughter.

After we'd calmed down a bit, he said, "Shall we go?" I nodded, and he followed me out of the restaurant. I found myself swishing my hips as I walked. He was watching. I could feel it.

Outside in the soft half-dark of early evening, he turned to me. "Thank you. That was wonderful. Are you sure I can't drive you home?"

"No, the subway's right here," I said, not wanting to be alone in the car with him. There were so many thoughts and feelings running around in my head that I could almost feel them crashing into each other, sending each other flying. Nothing seemed to be the right thing to say, or to do. "Well, I guess I'd better get going."

Ignoring me, Kegan tipped my chin up so I was looking straight into his eyes. Without letting me go, he moved closer. I watched him like a rabbit caught in the headlights of an oncoming transport truck.

He's going to kiss me.

At the very last second, some remnant of sanity stopped its frantic rushing around in my mind and took over control of my body. I turned my head a little to the side, and his lips brushed my cheek. Even that contact sent shivers through me.

Kegan released me, stepped back, and smiled into my eyes. He didn't seem surprised that I'd turned away. Maybe he hadn't really been going to kiss me on the mouth. No, surely not.

"Good night, Candy. Bring that rug up."

"I will. Good night."

I stood on the pavement, watching him walk away, until an annoyed "Excuse me" cut into my daze. I moved out of the restaurant's doorway to allow the aggravated man to enter, and pulled my gaze away from Kegan with an effort. An enormous effort. Kegan never looked back, even though my eyes must have been burning holes in his back.

I turned and headed for the subway, lost in thought. He *had* changed. At that moment, if I'd been asked for my husband's name, I might not have remembered I was married.

And I wasn't at all sure Kegan remembered either.

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacat rocks@hotmail.com

Subject: Lou-Lou catchoo

Lou is a pain in the buttocks. He kept giving me more and more work, and it was all "my top priority". Bleah. Can I quit this job and be a kept woman? ;)

I'm glad the picture got through okay.

Ian, I'm thinking of bringing the rug your parents bought me for Christmas up from the basement. Are you okay with that?

Candice

Tuesday, August 16th

At about ten o'clock, I was buried in the research for the multiple projects that Lou kept forcing on me and was desperate for a distraction. Anything would have been better than work, really. A fire in the office, a hostage situation (I could picture myself shouting, "Please, take me! Take me! Save me from this place!"), a gas leak, whatever was available.

Woo-hoo-hoo-hoo!

I glared at my coworkers, who all sounded off again just to annoy me, and checked to see who'd sent me the new email. I half expected it to be Kegan, but no such luck.

To: canw@sapphireinteriordesign.com

From: larissabobissa@hotmail.com

Subject: Gimme presents!

Hey, Candy-ice. In case you've forgotten, tomorrow's my birthday. Just wanted to make sure we were still on for dinner at 6:30 at Setherwood. You said you'd be there, and I said you'd be square.

Hehehe.

L

I fired back a quick response, saying that I would of course be there but that she'd lost any chance of a present by calling me square, and then turned my attention reluctantly to my overflowing inbox.

I didn't get very far, though, since another email arrived a minute or two later. I skimmed it, then knocked on Lou's door.

"Kegan's just asked me to meet him at the restaurant. Is that okay with you?"

Lou thought for a second. "Should be fine. Can you make sure you're back by two, though? Leanne is coming in for her first meeting with me and I'd like you to meet her."

Another new client. I hoped she'd be less stressful for me than the last one.
"Sure, Lou, see you then."

After the near-kiss of the night before, I felt strange about seeing Kegan, but when I found him in the main restaurant area surrounded by paint chips of every possible shade of green, I couldn't help but smile at his air of utter confusion. He looked up and smiled back.

"They all look the same to me, Candy. I think the insides of my eyes are going to be green forever. How am I supposed to choose?"

I pulled up a chair and picked up a few paint chips. "Where exactly is this going?"

He gestured to the room around us.

I frowned. "Didn't Lou pick a color for you, or at least give a few suggestions? I'm sure he put them in the plan."

"He did, but I want something richer than what he picked. The floor in here will be the lighter hardwood, so I want something on the walls that has a real punch to it."

I searched through the chips until I found a deep kelly green, a forest green, and a beautiful teal. "What about these?"

Kegan took the chips and looked at them for a moment in silence. He held them up one at a time in front of him, and I realized he was looking from me to the paint chips and back again.

"This one," he said, holding out the teal. "What do you think?"

"It's gorgeous."

He held up the paint chip again, leaning toward me until the card was nearly touching my face. "It suits you."

I raised my eyebrows. "I suit paint?"

The paint chip's corner touched my cheek. "The color suits you. It makes your eyes glow."

I pulled away, not at all sure the paint was the glow inducer.

Even though Lou had already picked paint colors for the rest of the place, Kegan insisted we go through them again. He changed a few to colors only slightly different from Lou's original choices and left the rest as Lou had suggested. Once we were finished, he said, "What are you doing for lunch?"

"Grabbing something on the way back to the office. Lou needs me there at two, so--"

"So that gives us lots of time to go out."

"No, because I have tons of work to do today."

"By two?"

I shook my head. "No, just by the end of the day. I need to be there to meet the new client."

"Another new client," Kegan said with mock sorrow. "I've been replaced."

"You're the old client now."

He clapped a hand over his heart and staggered backward. "You're killing me, Candy. How can you be so cruel?"

I gave him my best innocent look and patted him on the arm. "It's not my fault you're the *old* client."

"Old before my time. Tragic. Do a good deed and take this senior citizen to lunch."

I wavered. "I have to be back by two."

"Not a problem. We old guys need a nap in the afternoon. I really want to try out a new restaurant, Candy. Come with me."

Soft jazz music was the only sound in the car. I'd never been in a car as quiet as Kegan's; I could barely hear the road noise. I felt isolated and enclosed, and in over my head.

We drove for about ten minutes before Kegan stopped for gas. When he left the car, I felt curiosity overwhelming my nervousness. As subtly as I could, I looked around. The car was spotless. The open storage area between the seats held a few jazz CDs, none by anyone I recognized.

Kegan went into the gas station to pay, and I popped open the glove box, knowing I shouldn't snoop but just too curious. Inside, along with the usual car manual and paperwork, were more CDs, all of which I did recognize. 80's rock. I closed the glove box and sat, pondering.

Did Kegan really like both this strange modern jazz and 80's music? It seemed like an odd combination. And if he didn't... why the jazz? It did suit the car far more than the rock would have, and it also suited the style of his restaurant. Was he remaking himself in a new image? And if so, who was he underneath?

Lost in thought, I embarrassed myself by giving a little squeak when he opened the door.

"Sorry, Candy, didn't mean to scare you."

I smiled, and thought of insisting again that he call me Candice. That was part of *my* new image. Somehow, though, it was nice to have that link with my past. Maybe Kegan would like a link with his.

"Do you... um, do you have any music other than jazz?"

He started the car, and said, "You don't like it?"

"Not really my favorite," I said, tacking on, "I prefer 80's music."

He turned to look at me. "No, sorry. I can turn it off if you want, or you can try the radio."

"No, that's okay. It kind of suits the car."

"I think so too," he said, smiling at me before pulling the car onto the road again.

When I arrived at the office at three, I forced myself to go straight to Lou's office. He was livid.

"Leanne just left, Candice. She stayed as long as she could, but she had another meeting. What happened?"

Kegan happened. "I'm really sorry, Lou. Kegan insisted on seeing a new restaurant, and the service was slow. We didn't get out of there until nearly two-thirty."

"You should have called."

"I know. I'm sorry."

I hadn't even thought of it. Kegan and I had discussed everything from religion to our favorite television shows to the scuba diving lessons he was going to take, and I had thought we'd barely been there an hour when he'd looked at his watch and said, "Candy, you're dead."

He'd called the waiter over and paid him, in cash, with what the waiter's lit-up face suggested was a huge tip, and then we'd raced out to the car. We'd planned increasingly ridiculous reasons for my lateness, until I'd said, "I'll tell him I met

a man and he wouldn't let me leave," and Kegan responded with, "That would work, since I don't want you to leave," and the atmosphere in the car had become so electric I could almost see the tension snapping in the air.

Lou drummed his fingers on his desk for a moment. "When I say I want you here, Candice, I mean it. Kegan's a client, yes, but I am your boss. I expect you to make Kegan, and all the clients, happy, but not at the expense of what I specifically ask you to do."

I nodded, since I had no idea what to say.

"Do not let this happen again. I'm very disappointed."

I nodded again and escaped his office.

Lou left a few minutes before five o'clock. Usually when he left, he said a hearty, "Goodbye all," and then added, "Have an awesome evening." Today, he hurled a "Later" over his shoulder and was gone.

"Wow," said Meredith. "He's not himself."

Everyone tossed around theories while I busied myself with wrapping up my last little project for the day, hoping they'd leave me out of it.

"Candice, any ideas?" Allyson called from across the room.

"No," I said, trying my best to sound both uninvolved and uninterested.

"Oh, c'mon," she wheedled. "You were in his office last, you must have a clue."

"I don't!"

Ouch. Much too loud and angry a response. It seemed to hang in the air, echoing over and over again.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled.

"I was just asking." Allyson's tone was full of frosty innocence, and she and Meredith left without saying goodbye to me.

Such a lovely day.

I went home feeling destroyed. I desperately wanted to just go to bed and sleep away the horrors of the day, but it was barely six o'clock, so I decided to take a nice hot bath instead.

I walked into the bathroom and recoiled at the sight of myself in the mirror. My hair hung limply in its ponytail, as sad and miserable as I felt. Its dull color and general stringiness left me looking like I didn't care about myself at all.

I sat down on the toilet lid and burst into tears. They say a picture's worth a thousand words; a picture of me would be saying, "I've given up" and "I don't care any more", over and over again.

I jerked some toilet paper from the roll and wiped my eyes. I deserved to be better than that. I *did* care, and I wasn't going to spend another minute looking like I didn't. I fled the house.

Fifteen minutes later I was at QuickCuts, where I always got my hair cut. My favorite stylist, Felicity, gave me a smile. "The usual, Candice?"

"No, definitely not the usual."

Her eyes widened. For two years I'd come in every five weeks and requested a trim. She'd tried to suggest a more interesting style a few times, but my constant refusals must have worn her down because she hadn't asked for ages. "Oh! Then what are we doing today?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "I want a *style*."

The other stylists gathered around or shouted suggestions as they worked on other clients. I sat in the chair as they debated: straight versus curls versus layered versus blunt.

At last, Felicity said, "Okay, here's what I'll do. How about a cut like this?" She pulled a magazine from the rack beside my chair, flipped through it, and showed me a picture of a stunning girl with softly tousled short hair.

"Ooh, not that short," I said, and one of the other stylists sighed in

disappointment. "I want it to stay long."

Felicity stared at me for a second and then turned to my reflection in the mirror. "Why?"

I locked eyes with my reflected self. Why indeed? It didn't suit me, I never wore it down, and it had actually made me cry today.

"I... I think long hair is sexier."

"Is that girl in the magazine not sexy?" Felicity demanded.

"Umm... she is, I guess. I'm not into girls, but--"

"Candice, here's the thing. I think you want to be the long-hair type, but you're really the short-hair type."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. Are you ready to be brave? Try something new?"

I answered without even thinking. "I so am."

She grinned at me.

"Do it quick, before I change my mind."

She took me at my word. In less than a minute my hair was wet and one side was pinned up against my head.

"Here we go," Felicity said. Horror swept me. Ian liked my hair long. What was I doing? I took a breath to tell her to stop just as she cut a huge chunk from the side that was hanging down.

She'd cut it off just above my ear. I stared at myself. Suddenly that side of my face looked thinner and my eyes looked huge and bright.

"Wow," I breathed.

"See? I told you."

"Yes, you did," I said vaguely, staring at myself in the mirror as the hair continued to fall.

The only bad moment was when she brought down the other side and I realized just how much she'd actually cut off. I felt momentarily sick, but it passed quickly. She'd been right, I was meant to have short hair.

Felicity spun the chair around so I was facing away from the mirror. I protested, but to no avail.

"You need to see it when it's done, not in progress. But you know what I think it needs?"

Before I could answer, one of the other stylists called, "Highlights!"

"Exactly!" Felicity said, and then to me, "Are you up for that?"

"Why not?" I said, feeling giddy and lightheaded, and not just because my head was, objectively, lighter than it had been on my arrival.

Felicity finished the cut, eliciting gasps of awe from her coworkers and frustration from poor me who still hadn't been allowed to see it. She mixed the color and painted it on, covering each section with foil, and then rolled over a huge hair dryer and positioned it over my head.

"Thirty minutes and it'll be done," she said, handing me a magazine. I flipped through a few pages, but it didn't interest me, so I closed my eyes and let my mind wander like Larissa had told me to do.

At first I was desperately itchy again, but I kept on trying and was rewarded: the itchiness faded away and my mind leapt joyfully from one topic to another, just touching on each one before dancing away again. *I should paint the bedroom teal. Ninja needs some new toys. I wonder where I could get trained to be a designer. Could I run instead of just walking on the treadmill? I need a new cell phone.*

Wait, what was that one? Design training? Where'd that come from? I didn't really want to be a designer.

I felt something in the middle of my chest turn cold and clammy. With my eyes

still closed, I asked myself, "Do you want to be a designer?" The cold place began to warm at once, spreading a radiance through me that I'd never felt before.

I *did*. I wanted to.

But I couldn't. My life was set in its track now, and I couldn't just go back to school.

"Wake up there, Candice," Felicity said, a laugh in her voice. I opened my eyes and the radiance shimmered away. Feeling dazed, I stood up and followed her to the sink. She rinsed my hair thoroughly, giving me a divine scalp massage in the process that seemed to bring me back to the real world, and then took me to her chair and blew my hair dry. At last, she said, "It's done. Close your eyes."

I did, and she turned the chair. I sat with my eyes still shut, afraid to look.

"What do you think?"

I forced my eyes open. A stranger sat staring back at me. A stranger whose elegantly short dark brown hair was laced with blonde and reddish highlights. A stranger with an absolutely perfect haircut.

I burst into tears. Felicity did the same. We jumped up and down and hugged each other. The other stylists cheered, and the clients smiled at our antics. At last, Felicity said, wiping her eyes, "You look gorgeous, if I do say so myself. Have you ever thought of wearing makeup? Even just a bit?"

"I am wearing a bit," I said, surprised. "Mascara and lip gloss."

"Ah," Felicity said, then, "Amanda, do you have a minute for Candice?"

"Of course," Amanda said, waving me over to her table, which was laden with more makeup than I'd ever seen in one place, even more than Larissa had.

Twenty minutes later, I looked completely different. Amanda had shadowed and lined my eyes, smoothed foundation over my skin, given me cheekbones like a model, and made my mouth look perfectly kissable. I could barely see myself in the image in the mirror. It was bizarre to stare into my own eyes and not recognize the person looking back.

I paid my rather large bill without complaint, and tipped both Felicity and Amanda generously. They'd truly worked miracles. As I walked to my car, I realized that my shoulders were pulled back and I was standing much taller than usual. I felt powerful and strong.

When I got home, I stared at myself in the mirror for a long time. I loved the haircut, no doubt about it. I looked more mature without looking old, and strong and confident. The makeup, however, I wasn't quite so sure about.

At first I'd been thrilled that I didn't look like me; not looking like me pretty much had to be an improvement. But now I was starting to feel a little different about it.

Was I really that bad that I needed to look completely different? Couldn't I just look like a slightly cleaned-up version of me?

I gently removed most of the makeup from the right side of my face, then examined what I'd done. The left side still looked like the perfect model face that Amanda had created. The right side looked like me, but me after I'd had a good night's sleep and been outside in the fresh air.

I stared at myself in the mirror for a long time, and then said something I'd never said to myself before.

"You look good."

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacat rocks@hotmail.com

Subject: Bringing it up

When I'm done here, I'll go get the rug and put it in the living room. You're right, they would have wanted it to be used and enjoyed instead of hiding in the basement. I hope Ninja leaves it alone. Once he figures out it's not food, it shouldn't be a problem. :)

I got my hair cut today. It's a bit different. I hope you'll like it. I like it a lot.

You confused me mentioning Kegan being gone. I AM still working with him -

Lou's too busy to take it over. I thought I told you that?

C.

I knew full well I hadn't told him I was still seeing Kegan daily. I hadn't told him I wasn't either; I'd ignored the subject all together. As my mother had always said when a boy teased me at school, "Just ignore him and he'll go away." But Kegan wasn't showing any signs of going away.

After shutting down the computer, I went downstairs and found the box in the back corner of the basement. It weighed more than I'd expected, and was nearly half my height, but I managed to get it up the stairs and set it down in the middle of the living room. My gym workouts seemed to be having an effect after all.

I pulled the half-stuck masking tape from the top of the box and opened the cardboard flaps, still not certain I wanted to see the bear but committed to it by having told Ian I would. Inside was a black garbage bag, which I pulled out, ripped open, and poured onto the floor.

The bear lay in a ball on the floor, its limbs wrapped around itself and secured with twine. High security for a rug. I found the kitchen scissors, eventually, in the computer room for some reason, and knelt down beside the bear.

I cut the first piece of twine and an arm shot out, startling me but making me giggle. A one-bear salute. Its shoulder fur was creased from being trapped in position for so long, but the rug appeared to be otherwise in good shape. Another cut, and the other arm was free. The legs were bound with one piece, and I cut that too and then spread the bear out on the floor. Unbound, it was nearly as long as I was tall.

It was mounted on cobalt blue felt, and looked just like a real taxidermist-mounted bear, assuming such a bear was made of white plush and had a big padded stomach. The bear's goofy face, and the black leather pads in its paws, made me laugh. Then cry. Then laugh again.

I lay down on the floor and rested my head on the bear's stomach, running my fingers over its fur. It smelled musty and a bit stale, but luckily it hadn't mildewed in the basement. I closed my eyes and sent a silent 'thank you' out to Ian's parents.

As a few more tears fell, Ninja wandered over and gave the bear an inquisitive look, then climbed up onto its stomach, right beside my head, and fell asleep at once.

The bear was clearly part of the family.

Wednesday, August 17th

I skipped the gym and spent ages getting ready for work. Felicity had promised that my new hair would be easy to style, and she'd been right. Getting the makeup to the subtle but polished look I'd found the night before, though, took forever.

Once I had it, or pretty close anyhow, I dressed carefully, wanting to make sure that my clothes didn't ruin the effect. I was able to slip easily into a skirt that had been snug a month ago, which made me even happier.

As I walked into the office, Allyson looked up from her desk. "May I help you?"

I couldn't stifle my giggle. "Allyson, it's me."

"Candice, your hair! You look amazing." She stood up. "Everybody come look at Candice."

I blushed but was also thrilled as they surrounded me and showered me with compliments. Nobody commented directly on my makeup, but Meredith did say that I looked well-rested, which was nice.

People began to drift back to their desks after complimenting me. Allyson and I chatted for a minute about my haircut and how scared I'd been when Felicity cut that first chunk of hair.

"It suits you, though," Allyson said. "Not everyone's meant to have long hair."

As her hair reached nearly to her waist, I had a moment of feeling stung. It passed quickly. I was meant to have short hair, and that was fine. That was just the way I was.

I got a coffee and settled into the final details of a client's research. I was down

to the last few issues, but I'd left the really complicated ones to the end and I had to concentrate to get them done.

I tried, but the noise level in the office, while not really loud, was just distracting enough to make focus difficult. I pulled my headphones out of my desk drawer, and in moments Meat Loaf was singing into my ears. I couldn't have the music on loud enough to block all of the office sound, or else I might not have been able to hear Lou if he called for me, but it made enough of a difference that I could get to work.

I was so into what I was doing that I hardly noticed when the little bit of the background office noise I could still hear changed, with a new voice being added. I noticed, though, when a hand gave my shoulder a gentle grip. Noticed, and gasped in surprise. I pulled off my headphones and looked up.

"Sorry, didn't mean to scare you," Kegan said. His glance roamed over my hair and face, and I saw admiration growing in his eyes. All he said, though, was, "You got your hair cut."

I admitted that this was the case.

"Looks nice," he said.

"Thanks." I couldn't help being a bit disappointed. I hadn't done it for him, but I would have expected him to react a little more.

"I was in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd drop in. Is there any way you could come to the restaurant with me?"

"Right now? Is something wrong?"

He shook his head. "I just have to decide how to set up the ladies' lounge area, so I figured I should ask a lady."

There were a great many 'ladies' working on the restaurant, any one of whom could have helped him. Still, he was the client. "Sure. Just give me two seconds to finish this."

I typed a few notes to myself about exactly where I'd been in the research before saving the files, then popped out my CD and shut down the computer, putting

the CD and headphones away in my desk.

"Meat Loaf?" Kegan said, giving me a quizzical smile. "I used to love him, but it's been ages since I heard him."

"Want me to bring it?"

He shook his head. "I have the jazz CDs in the car. They'll do."

We left the office and he held the car door open for me. I could get used to such treatment. He got in and locked the doors, but didn't start the car. Confused, I turned toward him to find him studying me with intensity.

"What?"

"You look..." He stopped, shaking his head. "God, you're gorgeous."

I looked away quickly, feeling embarrassed and wildly happy. "Thanks," I said, staring at my hands.

"You're gorgeous, and smart, and doing such a great job," he said, his voice slipping into that low sexy register I'd never been able to resist. "I don't know how I got lucky enough to find you again."

Too much. He was pushing me too hard. I cleared my throat, turned away from him, and said with an enormous effort, "Shouldn't we get to the restaurant?"

He reached across and touched my right cheek, then gently turned my head to face him again. Our eyes locked as he stroked my cheek, and the heat and hunger, in my body and in his eyes, shocked me.

"I just want you to know how much I appreciate you," he said, so quietly I could barely hear him, his caress sending sheer desire rampaging through me. His fingers slid slowly onto my neck, and my eyes drifted closed.

Just for a second, then I dragged myself away from him. It was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do.

Without a word, he started the car, and we drove to the restaurant in silence. My body was crying out for more of his touch, but my mind was busy lecturing it

about how wrong it was.

Why did it have to feel so good?

Larissa loved my new hairstyle. The makeup was a bit less of a success, but I wasn't surprised; Larissa's career meant she was basically incapable of complimenting a makeup job she didn't do herself. I was pleased, though, when she said, "You look like you, just a bit more polished." After a few minutes of this beauty chatter, her mind unfortunately turned to the topic I was dreading.

"So did you have that dinner with him?"

I nodded, hoping against hope she'd drop the subject. I should have known better.

"Was it just you and him?"

I nodded again.

Larissa put her glass down sharply on the table.

"You didn't."

I tried to buy myself some time by wiping up the bit of Larissa's chocolate martini that had escaped from her glass, but she didn't let me get away with it.

"You went out with him?"

"I couldn't figure out how to get out of it."

"How about saying no?"

"But I'd already said yes."

Larissa was blazing. I'd known she'd be upset, but I hadn't expected this.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"What do--"

Larissa rolled on, not letting me get a word in. "How could you do something like that to Ian?"

"I didn't do anything," I protested, starting to get angry myself. "He's a client. We just had dinner and a few drinks."

"How naïve are you? That is not the guy to have any drinks with. He's bad news."

I took a breath to respond, and was fortunately stopped by the arrival of our waitress. Since we were regulars at the place, she knew us, and chatted for a few minutes.

After the waitress left us with our appetizers, Larissa began to pick halfheartedly at her shrimp cocktail. I stared sadly at my mussels, and imagined them all staring sadly back at me. After all, what did any of us have to be happy about?

Larissa touched my hand, and I looked up. She looked about as happy as I felt.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to get mad. It's just..."

"I know, and I'm sorry too. I really didn't know how to get out of it."

Larissa nodded. "I can see that." Then she rallied.

"Well, tell me everything! How'd it go? What did he say? What did you say? Was he hitting on you? C'mon, I want details!"

"I'd give you details, but *someone* keeps talking."

We both laughed. I was so relieved that we were basically back to normal. I knew she wasn't pleased that I'd seen Kegan, but I would never have expected her to be. If she'd known about the Wonderland trip...

Over our appetizers and main courses, and several martinis each, I gave Larissa nearly the full story about my outing with Kegan. She was especially interested in the whole 'smart girl, beautiful girl' thing.

"He's just trying to make you forgive him so he doesn't have to feel bad."

I shook my head slowly. "I honestly don't know. He seemed so shocked and horrified by what he'd said--"

"The way everyone's been who's heard about it," Larissa interrupted.

"True. But it didn't feel like he was trying to hide something. I really do think he felt bad about it."

"Well, good," said Larissa, who, as the main person who'd helped me pick up the pieces after Kegan'd taken me apart, was well within her rights to want him miserable.

"I guess," I said.

Larissa's eyes widened. "Do you not want him to feel bad? I'd want him to be devastated. I *do* want him to be devastated."

"It was so long ago..." I tried.

Larissa slammed her hand down hard on the table, shaking all of our empty glasses and sending a ripple of heads snapping up across the restaurant.

"I don't care," she said quietly but with tremendous force, "whether it was three decades ago or three minutes ago. He hurt you. He hurt you a lot. And I'm not sure you've ever really gotten over it. So don't bother trying to tell me it was a long time ago. Because I don't care. And if you can forgive him, then maybe I can't care about you."

I stared at her in shock, and then my earlier anger resurrected itself.

"Who asked you to? You're not my mother. I didn't ask for a lecture. Did I order a lecture?" I made a great show of pretending to look for a menu. "Were there lectures on the menu? 'Cause I don't think I asked for one. So why am I getting one?"

Larissa downed her martini in one gulp then set the glass down on the table deliberately, her eyes never leaving mine, and reached for her purse. She pulled out some money, dropped it on the table, and stood up.

"I won't lecture you any more. I'm leaving. Good luck to you. You'll need it."

And with that, she turned and walked out of the restaurant, leaving her birthday present behind on the table.

I sat in shock, waiting to know what to do. Should I go after her? Wait for her to come back? Call her cell phone and give her hell?

In the end, I did none of these things. The waitress came by, and I told her that Larissa had had to leave suddenly. She expressed concern, and I told her I was sure everything would be fine. I paid the bill, picked up the gift basket of bath products that I'd bought for Larissa and set out on the walk home.

Damn Kegan. Somehow he ruined everything every time.

Larissa was my oldest friend. Had I just lost her over this?

Well, it had been her fault anyhow. I was doing fine. I hadn't done anything wrong, so why had she been so angry? I could handle myself, and I could handle Kegan.

A little voice inside me reminded me that I had very nearly let Kegan kiss me after dinner, and that his touch that morning had been overwhelming. We'd worked together for a few hours afterward as if nothing had happened, but every time our eyes met electricity zipped through me. There was no evidence at all that I could actually handle Kegan, and I was fast losing control over myself.

I was passing Tim Horton's, and in a daze I turned in. I bought a cup of coffee and sat at a table, deep in thought.

Why *did* Kegan still have such a hold on me? Was it simply that he was so good looking, so magnetic? It couldn't be just that. I could remember how I'd felt about Ian when we'd first gotten together, and it was as far from what I'd felt for Kegan as Ian was from me right now. Ian and I were meant to be together, but somehow I kept losing my connection with that.

Maybe it was just my familiarity with Ian. We knew each other very well, and there weren't many surprises any more. I never quite knew what Kegan would do. Not always a good thing, frankly.

I sipped my coffee, and suddenly felt cold and ill. I knew what it was. It was that god-awful comment about the smart girl and the beautiful one. Larissa was right,

I'd never let that go. I couldn't believe that anyone, including Ian, really saw me as beautiful, because when someone said I was, I heard Kegan's voice saying I wasn't. The only time I *didn't* hear it was when Kegan complimented me.

Larissa had been right. I grabbed my cell phone and tried to call her. The phone rang and rang. Since Larissa kept her cell phone with her at all times, she was obviously ignoring me. I laboriously sent a text message, so slow with that sort of thing that it would probably have been faster to send a carrier pigeon, to let her know that a) I was sorry, and b) she was right.

By the time that was done, I'd finished my coffee. I threw out my paper cup and walked slowly to the door.

So, now I knew what was causing me so much trouble.

But how was I going to fix it?

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacatocks@hotmail.com

Subject: New resident

The bear has taken over the living room. Ninja loves it - he barely even got off its stomach to eat his dinner. I was afraid he was sick for a minute when he wouldn't come to eat, but he was just being lazy. Lazier.

The hair is quite a bit shorter, and it has highlights. I got lots of compliments today - I hope you'll like it too!

And as for Kegan, he's messed up my work schedule, got Lou all freaky, and just hearing his name makes Larissa crazy. He's by far more trouble than he's worth. By far.

C

Thursday, August 18th

Kegan left me alone all day, and I was relieved. When I didn't see him,

everything was fine. Even Lou's annoying parade of tasks was preferable to getting closer to Kegan, and I got a lot done, putting myself in a good mood by the end of the day.

I'd sent out an email to my friends after my makeover suggesting that a bunch of us should go together to get manicures and pedicures. Unfortunately, most hadn't been able to come along. Larissa had said she might, but after last night I rather doubted she'd be there. Tasha was the only one who'd been definitely up for it.

As I left work and drove to Kristy Nails, I wondered if having nice pretty nails would help make me feel beautiful. I doubted it, but it couldn't hurt.

I entertained myself imagining a 'self-concept' store, where I could go and just pick up a new one whenever my old one was tired, or didn't suit me any more, or just wasn't quite as positive and cheery as I would like.

There'd be a salesgirl to help me choose. "And are we looking for beautiful, or brilliant, or average?"

"Why would I want average?"

"Some people do. It can be nice for a change."

"No, I want to believe I'm brilliant and attractive too."

"Ah, the 'Beauty and Brains' bundle. I have it right here."

And she'd install it for me, get it all tuned up and ready to go, and there I'd be.

This whole rebuilding my self-concept after Kegan was a long and tedious process, and apparently I wasn't even close, even though I'd thought I was finished. 'Work in progress' wasn't exactly the kind of image to which I was aspiring.

Better than 'disaster zone', though, I supposed.

Poor Kristy definitely thought I was a disaster zone when I arrived. As the owner, she generally didn't take clients, but when she saw my hands she began shouting orders in Japanese and a flurry of activity resulted, ending in me ensconced in a pedicure chair with my feet and fingertips soaking in basins of

warm scented water.

"How long since you last have pedicure?" Kristy demanded.

I hedged, trying to figure out how to say 'Right before I got married' without sounding like I didn't take care of myself.

"Look like years," Emily said, leaning over her boss's shoulder to inspect the horrors that were my feet.

I looked noncommittal. Both Kristy and Emily shook their heads in shock and disgust.

By the time Tasha showed up, ten minutes late for her appointment and about five minutes before I'd expected her to manage to arrive, Kristy had scrubbed my feet so hard that I was afraid she'd exposed bone, and Emily had managed to get my fingernails smooth and shaped.

Tasha's nails were inspected, pronounced not quite as bad as mine but still in desperate need of care, and she was soon settled in the chair next to mine.

"You look great! The hair's amazing."

"Thanks," I said, smiling. "It was time for a change."

We sat in silence for a few minutes, and then she said, "You have the vibration on?"

"The... pardon?"

Tasha held up a small black box that was sitting on the arm of my chair. "The chair does massage. Try it."

I took the box and tried to decipher the little symbols. One looked like a collection of ocean waves, one was just a bunch of dots, and one was a very large wave. Tasha started her own chair going, and closed her eyes as she leaned back into it.

"Better than sex."

"If you say so." I gingerly pressed the dot button. The chair began spasming, poking me in the back and the back of my legs alternately. Yuck. I switched to the large wave.

Ah, much better. The chair stroked smoothly all the way down my back to the underside of my knees and then started again at the top. I sighed.

"See? Better than sex."

"More accessible, anyhow, these days," I mumbled, rolling my neck slightly as the chair worked its miracles on the knots in my back.

"When does Ian come home again?"

"A week and a bit. Next Saturday."

"Bet you can't wait."

"You're so right. Hey, how's your..." I said, accompanying the words with an imitation of the vague gesture Tasha had used to describe her intended piercing.

"Took it out."

"Bummer. How come?"

"It didn't want to heal, and it was all sore and swollen and--"

"Keep the details to yourself, okay?"

"You asked!"

"Not for the full report, just for how it was doing."

"Hey, I didn't tell you about the pus, or the bleeding, or--"

"I will barf on your newly painted toenails if you keep this up," I threatened, not entirely in jest. Then I realized what would really distract her. "Did I tell you I went back there and got a tattoo?"

Tasha stared at me. "You know you didn't tell me any such thing. And I know you're just trying to make me stop grossing you out. I'll let you get away with it,

though. Did you really get one?"

"Yup."

"What? Where? How big? How was it?"

"Polar bear looking up at a star, on my lower back, about this big," I said, stretching out my fingers to show the approximate size, "and it hurt kind of a lot but it was okay."

"Wow." Tasha shook her head, staring at me in amazement. "I'd never have the nerve to get a tattoo."

When we were manicured and pedicured to within an inch of our lives, we decided to take ourselves and our lovely new nails out for dinner. Tasha wanted to go to Setherwood, but I couldn't face it after my disastrous dinner with Larissa, so I suggested we go to Nests, the hot new restaurant just down the street. The too-hip-to-associate-with-the-likes-of-us waitress gave us our menus, took our drink order with a clear sense of disdain, and left us alone to decide what we wanted to eat.

She returned with the drinks and stood waiting to take our order with an air of already knowing that we would choose just the wrong thing. I wasn't actually ready, but I couldn't bring myself to send her away. I was convinced we'd never see her again.

"Go ahead," I said to Tasha as I frantically scanned the menu.

"I'll have the maple cream soup to start, then the robin soufflé, and an order of alphagetti on the side."

The waitress and I stared at her, me in astonishment and the waitress with surprisingly little surprise.

"Perhaps you have us confused with another restaurant," she said, icicles in her voice. "We do not serve alphagetti."

But they served robin soufflé? I raised an eyebrow quizzically at Tasha.

"Sorry," she said, sounding just the opposite. "I've always wanted to order something completely random and see what happened."

What happened was that the waitress pursed her lips and leaned back as if to avoid being contaminated by us, and I gave Tasha a "don't get us kicked out" glare.

"All right, fine," she said. "I'd like the soup and the soufflé. I'll just have to get my alphagetti later."

The waitress turned to me, barely acknowledging Tasha's order. "And for you?"

"I... ummm... the carrot soup first, please, and then the filet mignon, cooked medium-well, please, with a baked potato."

"Very well," the waitress said in a 'Lord, what fools these mortals be!' tone, and turned away, no doubt to complain about us to the other staff.

I shook my head at Tasha. "You're a crazy person."

"Maybe, but it's fun. Hey, speaking of fun, and crazy for that matter, we need Larissa here. Should I call her?"

She was already whipping out her cell phone. I winced.

"No?"

I shook my head. "No, better not. We had a... difference of opinions last night. I'm not sure she really wants to see me."

"Oof. What about?"

"Ummm.... because I went out for dinner with Kegan."

"You *what*?" I hadn't met Tasha until after Kegan and I had broken up, so she didn't have the same hatred of him as Larissa did. Still, she'd heard enough about him from Larissa to know he wasn't good news.

"Please don't you get mad at me too, I can't take it."

Tasha took a very deep breath and closed her eyes. I could see her lips moving as

she slowly counted to ten. Then eleven. Twelve. Thirteen.

She opened her eyes. "Okay, I'm calm now."

"Why'd you go to thirteen?"

"'Cause sometimes ten just isn't enough. Why on earth would you go out with him? How'd you even find him?"

I was sure I'd told Tasha about my new relationship with Kegan when she and I had gone to the tattoo place, but she said, "Yeah, but I thought it was just the work thing. I had no idea you were going out with him."

"I'm not!"

"Aren't you?"

"Of course not."

I explained the whole long story, leaving out our Wonderland trip and the way I reacted to his touch just as I had when I'd talked to Larissa. By the time I was finished talking, we'd both eaten our dinners and were casting covetous glances at the dessert trolley as it was wheeled around.

Tasha nodded slowly. "I get it. Gotta say I kind of agree with Larissa."

"Yeah, me too," I confessed. "I didn't at first, but I thought about it and she's totally right."

"So now what?"

"So now I don't see him again."

"But..."

"I know. I'll wrap up the restaurant stuff over email as much as possible, make sure I meet with him with a bunch of people if I actually have to see him, and hurry up and finish the job. Then no more Kegan, ever."

Tasha looked at me speculatively, and I cringed inside, sure she was going to point out the many flaws in my little plan, but all she said was, "Shall we flag

down Ms. Snooty and get dessert?"

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacat rocks@hotmail.com

Subject: I have lovely new nails!

Tasha and I went to get our nails done today after work. All twenty. Forty, I guess, if you add us up.

Mine are bright pink and hers are turquoise. Yes, turquoise. No, I don't know why.

Ninja is now ignoring me in favor of the rug. He won't even sit with me when I'm on the couch. I have my crocheting but it's not the same. I need a hug.

:)

C

Friday, August 19th

His arms were locked around me, and mine around him. I could barely breathe, so full of shock and lust I couldn't think. All I knew was I never wanted him to let go.

The day had started out normal enough; I'd gone to work and slaved over a hot computer for hours. Kegan had been off meeting with his lawyers and accountant all day, so I hadn't left the office once, and my coworkers hadn't gone anywhere either. As five o'clock neared, we were all ready to break free and have some fun.

While Lou and Richard were in a meeting together, Allyson called us all over and said, "You know what? We should go out dancing tonight. Want to?"

We looked at each other; it had never been that sort of office. The spa trip Meredith had organized had been enough of a stretch for us.

"Sure, why not?" Karen finally said, and in the end five of us agreed to go.

We scattered to our respective houses for a quick clothing change and general tartying up, and then met up at Setherwood for dinner, going on to Light afterwards for an evening of drinking, dancing, gossip and men-watching.

Everyone but Allyson was married, and she had a boyfriend, but it didn't matter. As Meredith pointed out, "It's fine to look at the items up for auction, as long as you don't place any bids." And we looked. Oh, how we looked. And rated.

We rated the men as they danced or chatted or waited at the bar for the desperately overworked bartenders to make them a desperately complicated drink. Bonus points for a not-too-girly drink, points taken away for strange clothes, or odd facial hair (what made men think it was a good idea to sculpt their faces like some sort of topiary?), or bad dance moves.

We laughed, and drank, and danced, and drank some more, and went to the bathroom in a giggling pack, and just generally had a wonderful night. Our hilarity was obviously infectious, because each of us got asked to dance at least twice. We turned them all down, though. We were having a lovely girls-only night.

Until Kegan found me.

I'd thought I'd seen him earlier that night, standing just off the dance floor watching me, but when I'd looked back there'd been nobody there and I'd decided it hadn't really been him.

Karen and Laurel went off to the bathroom together to keep each other entertained while waiting in the long line. Meredith ran into an old friend who dragged her off to meet her new boyfriend, and Allyson went to the bar, after making sure I was okay, to line up for another drink.

I was alone. But only for a minute.

When I heard the voice in my ear, low and terrifyingly sexy, my body reacted even before I knew it was him, heat spilling through me. "Dance with me."

I turned to see him holding out his hand to me. I faced him, his words and their tone still rippling through my mind, our eyes locked, and I knew he'd come to

the club for me.

Staring into his eyes, I felt a delicious surge of knowing he wanted me. He didn't have to want me. We weren't married. But he did. He was *choosing* to want me. And that was what finally pushed me over the edge.

I stepped toward him and he guided me past the other dancers, hand in the small of my back against my tattoo, as the heavy beat of "November Rain" rivaled the pounding of my heart. When he took his hand away, I stopped, and he turned me to face him then drew me close, sliding his arms around my waist. I rested mine on his shoulders, and he held me tightly but delicately, as if afraid I would shatter.

We stood, barely moving, on the dance floor, the dimmed lights heightening my other senses. The pulse of the music, the heat of his body, the feel of his hands on my back, the subtly sexy richness of his cologne... I was smothered in sensation. Sensation and the knowledge that I was on the brink. I had to leave.

It took all the strength I possessed to pull away a few inches. Before I could try to go further, Kegan's hand stroked with gentle but commanding pressure up my back and he tangled his fingers in my hair.

"Stay," he murmured. His breath against my skin sent desire crashing through me and I bit my lip against it.

He looked into my eyes, and whatever he saw there made him turn me away from him. I didn't understand, until he said into my ear, "If you want to go, go." When he added, "I only want you if you're sure you want me," the words "I want you" seemed to dance through my body, setting me ablaze.

I stood, eyes closed, with his hands caressing my shoulders, fighting with myself. If I turned around to face Kegan, I'd be lost. If I left right now, everything would be fine. My life, my marriage, just as they had been. I knew what I had to do, but I couldn't make myself step away.

But I didn't *want* my life to be just as it had been. I needed things to change. It had been so long since I'd felt like this, and knowing he felt it too... I had to have more.

I turned around.

The heat and passion in his eyes undid me. He touched my cheek with his finger, gently stroking it, and I let out the breath I didn't know I'd been holding in a rush that was nearly a moan. Then the finger moved to the corner of my lips, and I did moan.

I felt like we were the only ones in the room, like the entire world had ceased to exist around us. As his finger moved on, my mouth opened, almost involuntarily. He slipped just inside, and my eyes closed as I touched the tip of his finger with my tongue, tracing tiny circles over his skin.

When I heard him groan, my eyes snapped back open. He dropped his hand to his side and I felt bereft until his arms went back around my waist and he pulled me strongly against him. No delicacy this time, just desire.

He stared down into my eyes, his lips agonizingly close to mine, and didn't move. I stared up at him, my mind whirling. His eyes were dark and hungry, his hands tightened on my back, but still he did nothing. What was he waiting for?

With our bodies pressed together, the tension between us grew to the point I couldn't bear it, and I stretched upward, seeking his mouth. As soon as I moved, he did too.

When he kissed me, I felt like a candle bursting into flame.

He kissed me for what seemed like hours but could only have been a few minutes, slow and sweet at first then harder and more demanding. I matched him throughout, swept by so many feelings and emotions I could barely stand up. I couldn't think, didn't want to think. All I could do was feel.

I had to stop him. But I just couldn't bring myself to pull away. It was like his kiss was the only thing keeping me alive.

One kiss, that's it, I promised myself fiercely. As soon as the kiss was over, I'd find a way to get away.

Somehow.

Kegan pulled me even closer, pressing my hips into his. An electric shock ran down my spine, and I found myself grinding against him. He growled, somewhere deep in his throat, and deepened the kiss still more, and the shock

came again, even stronger. I couldn't get out of this, couldn't get away.

Because I didn't want to.

That was the shameful truth. I didn't want to stop. I loved my husband, and I was kissing another man and couldn't stop. I'd loved Kegan once, and Ian was so far away, and Kegan wanted me, and I couldn't let go.

It's just kissing, I told myself, trying desperately to be rational as I drowned in him. Kissing isn't so bad, I won't even have to tell Ian, it's just a silly little thing that happened because I'm drunk. I'll just kiss him a bit and that'll be the end of it.

I almost believed myself too.

Until Kegan pulled himself sharply back from me, grabbed my hand, and half-led-half-dragged me off the dance floor. Past a stunned Allyson before she could react, past a crowd of rather disappointed-looking guys ("Damn, show's over" drifted back to me as we went) and then out the door.

A line of taxis waited to take the drunks home after the club closed, and we were in the first one, with the door closed and the driver told where to take us, before I knew what was happening.

Then that gorgeous mouth came down on mine again, and I couldn't think of anything but kissing. Kegan. Kissing Kegan. Fireworks were exploding everywhere in my body and mind.

The taxi stopped with a jerk. Kegan threw money to the driver, who looked both disgusted and turned on, as I scrambled out of the car. We raced up the walkway of the tallest condominium I'd ever seen, the building all sharp angles and silvered glass. Kegan slapped a small card against a sensor and the front door swung silently open.

The lobby, serene and elegant, and its waiting concierge made us slow our pace a bit, but when we finally reached the elevator Kegan hit the button for the thirtieth floor and pulled me to him again as the door slid closed.

By the time the door opened, my body was aching for him and my mind was numb. I'd never felt like this before, not even when Kegan and I had been dating

the first time, and the only thought on my mind was, "More."

We fell into his apartment, and he kicked the door shut and pressed me hard against it, hands strong on my shoulders. His mouth on mine, though, was sweet, almost tentative, dancing and exploring, and the contrast flooded me with heat again.

I'd wrapped my arms around his waist, but slowly withdrew them, smoothing my hands over his back and sides. He shifted away from me just enough to let my hands in between us, and I ran my fingers over his stomach through his t-shirt until I couldn't stand the barrier any longer and slipped them under the fabric.

My palms flat against his warm skin, I slid my hands over him as he played with my mouth, the feel of his muscles tightening at my touch gloriously familiar. He nipped my lower lip, and I paused, losing myself in his kiss again, forgetting what I was doing, until he groaned and murmured, "Don't stop," against my lips. As another bolt of electricity tore through me, I drew just the pads of my fingers over his skin, again and again, tracing him, relearning every inch of his chest and stomach.

Then Kegan backed away, pulling me along with him, kissing me every step of the way. I slid my arms around his waist for balance, holding on tight. The floor beneath my feet felt like hardwood, but then it changed to a plush carpet. I opened my eyes.

It was the sight of his bed that did it. A tiny voice started screaming in the stunned silence of my mind. *You're going to end up sleeping with him if you don't leave. Sleeping with him.*

Sleeping with Kegan.

Those three words managed to get my attention where nothing else had. I could not let this happen. I forced myself to put my hands on Kegan's chest and push him away. He didn't release me at first, so I pushed with all my strength. He stepped back then, and we stared at each other.

It hurt not to have him touching me, kissing me. Every part of my body shrieked in protest, and I almost threw myself back into his arms, but that little voice was in control and I didn't.

He looked as dazed as I felt as he took another step backward, still staring at me, then turned and sat down on the end of the bed. He put a hand over his eyes and rubbed his temples.

As the desire began to subside, I realized what I had let happen, and how close we had been, and my stomach twisted. I wrapped my arms around myself, looking for comfort, but I couldn't find any. Didn't deserve any.

Neither of us spoke for several long moments. When he finally raised his head and looked at me, the strength drained from my body at his expression, a mix of anger and hatred. I wobbled, catching hold of the open door for support.

"God," he said, disgust in his voice. "God, I'm so sorry."

It took a second for the words to sink in. By the time they did, he'd gone on.

"What the hell was I doing? That's not how I wanted it to go. You must hate me."

The last of my strength flickered and disappeared, and I lowered myself to sit on the carpet before I collapsed. "Hate you?"

"For what I did." He shook his head. "Forcing myself on you like that."

I stared at him for a long moment before finally finding words. "You didn't force me." I swallowed hard. "I wanted to."

"Well, eventually, yeah, I guess you did," he said, a tiny smile flashing across his face before the serious expression returned. "But at the beginning. You didn't want that. I took advantage of you."

For a split second, I longed to believe his side of the story. It made me look much better. Not an equal partner, but someone who'd been dragged unwilling into it.

The only problem was, it wasn't remotely how it had happened.

I studied the carpet, unable to look at him. "You didn't force me, even at the beginning. I never should have done it, but I did. You didn't make me."

"Are you sure?"

Tears rose at the hope in his voice. I nodded, unable to speak. Something about what he'd said earlier began nagging at me. I replayed his words in my mind and realized what it was.

"What did you mean, 'that wasn't how it was supposed to go'?"

He looked at me, and seemed to notice for the first time that I was sitting on the floor. "Would you rather sit up here?"

I shook my head. I wasn't going anywhere near his bed. "I'm fine. Answer the question."

He sighed. "It's not going to be a quick answer. Do you want to sit in the living room or something?"

I didn't, but we did need to talk, and anywhere would be better than his bedroom. I pushed myself to my feet, waiting to make sure I wouldn't fall, then walked out. Following, he indicated the living room. "I'll make coffee. Have a seat."

Four small armchairs were clustered in a group near the floor-to-ceiling windows. I sat down in the nearest, and my eyes were caught, and held, by the view. Lake Ontario filled the windows, dark and secret, with moonlight dancing on its waves. I felt small and utterly insignificant as I gazed at it. The lake had been there long before we'd been there, and it would probably still be there after all the buildings had fallen apart. It didn't care what a mess I'd made.

After a few minutes, Kegan set a mug down on the table beside my chair and settled himself in the chair across from mine. I picked up my mug and wrapped my fingers around it. The warmth spread up my hands and arms, but didn't go nearly far enough to soothe my heart.

He sighed. "You wanted to know what I thought was going to happen."

I nodded.

"Tell me first, what do you think's been happening with us?"

I licked my lips. "We're getting to be friends again."

"Just friends?"

"That's all we *can* be."

"Is it all you want?"

His eyes were intent on my face. I thought about all the feelings of the last few weeks, Kegan's support and kindness, and the hunger I'd felt that night in his arms, and I thought about Ian and all that we'd been through in our short marriage and how good, and how bad, he'd been to me. I looked into Kegan's eyes and told him the truth. "I don't know what I want."

"I came there tonight to tell you I want you back."

His words seemed almost visible, hanging in the air between us. I heard them over and over again in the moments I sat, stunned, staring at him.

When I didn't say anything, he said, "I think it started the day you got that phone call from your doctor. You were crying, and I was holding you, and I just felt like I had to protect you. I hated that you were sad. Wonderland was so good, and it reminded me of how great we were together. And since then..." He shrugged. "Since then, you're all I can think about."

"I'm married," I said, hardly able to get the words out.

"I know," he said, "and it's killing me. Candy, do you really love him?"

"I do," I said, because I did.

Pain flickered over his face, and an echoing pain ripped through me. I knew, deep down inside, that I was far too close to falling in love with him again. "I have to go," I said, struggling to my feet. "I can't be here any more."

"I'll drive you home," he said.

"No. Just let me go."

"Candy, please. We have to talk."

"Why?" I turned on him in a fury. "What good will it do? You say you want me back, and I can't do it no matter what I want, and I'm a cheater and I made vows to Ian and you hurt me before and I'm scared of you and I have to go!"

My voice rose to a shriek on the last words and we stared at each other for a second before my rage turned to sorrow and I began to cry.

He tried to put his arms around me, but I jerked away. I wanted the comfort of his embrace so badly, but I was terrified of where it would lead. He stood in front of me as the tears poured down my face, then murmured my name and held his arms out to me again.

I shook my head, then moved into his arms. He held me tight as the sobs shook me, and I clung to him as if the world were ending around us.

When at last the storm subsided, I stepped back away from him. "What are we going to do?" I said, my voice raw.

He shook his head. "I don't know."

My shaking legs managed to get me past him and back to the armchair. "We have to figure it out. I can't live like this."

He returned to his chair as I said, "After your restaurant is done, I guess we just won't see each other again." I ignored the spasm of grief that shook me at the thought. Realizing I was shivering, I wrapped my arms around myself. "So we just have to figure out how to handle it until that happens."

Kegan got up and walked away, returning with a throw blanket. He covered me with it, then sat down again, in the chair beside me this time. "Candy, I don't want to stop seeing you."

"You have to."

"No, we don't have to."

I stared at him. "I'm with Ian."

"You could be with me."

"I *was* with you, remember? You broke my heart. Why would I do that again?"

He smoothed a strand of hair from my cheek, his touch, even now, sending shivers through me. "Because I was ten years younger and too blind to see what

I had, too stupid to appreciate you. Because we were so good together until I ruined it, and I think we'd be even better now. Because..."

Our eyes met, and I saw what he was going to say. I shook my head, trying to ward him off, but he said it anyhow. "Because I'm falling in love with you again."

"No, you're not."

He protested, but I went on over him. "You're not! You just want to make yourself feel better for what you did before. You don't care about me."

"Look me in the eye and say that."

I swallowed hard, but did as he said. "You don't... you don't... oh..."

I couldn't say it. He *did* care. I could see it in his eyes. He shook his head. "I wish I didn't, Candy, I swear. If I wanted Fiona instead, it'd be so much easier. I tried to convince myself. But it's not her. It's you."

He leaned over, to look even more deeply into my eyes. "Do you have any feelings for me at all?"

I couldn't speak, just staring at him. Oh, I had feelings for him, more than I'd realized, and he must have seen at least some of them because he put his hand on the back of my head and pulled me toward him, so gently I could hardly feel the pressure. I let him draw me in until we were barely inches apart, at which point he released me and curved his fingers over my cheek.

His eyes still fixed on mine, he moved closer, so slowly I could have stopped him at any time. I didn't.

The sweetness and emotion in his kiss brought tears to my eyes again. His mouth was gentle on mine, and stayed gentle even as the kiss intensified. I felt the absolute *rightness* of it flowing over me, through me.

Maybe it wasn't too late.

When the kiss ended, I dropped my head back against the chair. "No more. I can't. It's not right."

He nodded. "You're right. I'm sorry. I won't touch you again."

I was annoyed with myself for being a bit offended at how quickly he'd agreed. Didn't I *want* him not to touch me?

When we reached my house, the driveway was full of my car and Ian's, so Kegan parked at the side of the road a few doors down. He shut off the car and turned toward me.

"I'd ask if I could come in for a few minutes but it's probably a bad idea."

Definitely a bad idea. I just nodded.

"Candy, you *are* going to think about it, right? About us, I mean."

I wanted to say that I wouldn't, that I was married and would stay that way forever. I had to, though. Whatever was happening between Kegan and me was strong, and I had to decide what I wanted. "I will."

"Good." He paused for a second, his eyes serious, then went on. "I swear to you it'll be different this time. I know what I did wrong and it will never happen again. I'll make you happy, I promise."

I knew he meant it, and I was horrified by how much I wanted to let him try.

I unbuckled my seat belt and picked up my purse from the floor of the car.

"Good night."

"Good night, Candy."

I didn't move. I couldn't. I wanted something. I didn't know what it was, but I wanted it and I couldn't leave without it.

"If you don't want me to kiss you again, you need to leave," he said, his voice low and intense.

My heart began to beat faster. I didn't move.

"I promised I wouldn't touch you, but you need to go."

He gave me several seconds to do what I'd said I wanted and get away from him, then wrapped his arm roughly around my shoulders and pulled me to him.

From the moment our lips touched, his kiss set me on fire. The sweetness was still there, but the passion and need were at the forefront, and I gave as good as I got.

When we finally broke apart, I was gasping for breath and more than ready to choose him. If we'd still been at his house, I might have let him make love to me right then, might not have been able to control myself. I couldn't bring him into Ian's home, though. It would be betrayal on betrayal and I just couldn't do it.

"I want to see you tomorrow." His voice was full of desire, desire I'd raised in him, and it sent ripples of pleasure through me.

"Give me time to think," I said, even though I wanted nothing more than to see him again. "I'll see you at work on Monday."

He took a breath as if about to say more, then nodded. "I know it might look like I just want sex, but I don't." He gave me an unexpectedly evil grin. "Well, actually, I do. But not *just* sex."

I laughed. "No?"

"No," he said, turning serious again. "I want it all. Every last part of you."

He touched my cheek gently, and I shuddered but didn't move away. "We're good together. Think about it."

"Okay," I whispered, opening the car door and finally escaping into the night.

I half-expected him to leave the car and try to come into the house with me, but he didn't. He drove slowly along with me until I reached my house, then waited at the end of the driveway for me to unlock the door. Once it was open, he raised a hand in a thumbs-up. I returned the gesture, he blew me a kiss, and he was gone.

I went inside and looked around as if I'd never seen the place before. What would he have seen if I had let him in? His condo was so glossy and sleek; would he have liked my house, all greens and blues and polar bears?

I fed the cat and climbed slowly up the stairs, pausing at the door to the computer room. I owed Ian an email, but there was nothing I could say. Would I ever be able to talk to Ian again?

Tears rose again and began to spill down my cheeks. I passed through our bedroom and went into the bathroom, where I took off my clothes to take a shower. I looked at myself in the mirror for a long time. What kind of person was I?

I finally stepped into the shower and let the hot water pour over my head, washing away the tears even as they fell. I cried until the water ran cold.

Saturday, August 20th

I'd thought I needed to talk, but now that Tasha was sitting across from me with an expectant look on her face, I couldn't find a single thing to say.

In typical fashion, Tasha reached for her coffee and managed to knock mine over. In the flurry of finding napkins and having the coffee shop workers come over to clean up, I didn't have to say a significant word for several minutes. All too soon, though, we were re-settled, a fresh coffee in front of me, and she was again waiting for me to speak.

"How're you doing?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm fine. I'm not the one who called and said she needed to talk, though. Out with it!"

I looked down at my fingernails as if they held the secret of the universe, then told them, "I saw Kegan last night." They didn't react.

When Tasha didn't either, I looked up at her and saw confusion on her face instead of the horror I'd anticipated. "You're working with him, right? So didn't you expect to see him?"

"Not out at Light."

Tasha considered this for a moment. "Did you invite him?"

"No, he just showed up." I frowned. "I don't know how he knew we were there."

"We?"

"A bunch of us from work."

"Ah. Okay, so he was there and you were there. I'm missing the problem."

"The problem was when he kissed me."

Tasha froze with her coffee cup midway to her mouth. She set the cup down carefully before saying, "Maybe you should have started with that part. What happened?"

"He asked me to dance. While we were out on the dance floor..." I didn't know how to say it. It had been so incredible, and any words I thought of to describe it just didn't seem right. I tried anyhow. "He kissed me, and--"

"Just once?"

"Yeah, I guess. It was a long one, though."

"Okay, and then what?"

"We went to his condo."

"Where does he live?"

"In one of the skyscraper condos by the lake."

"Was it nice? I've always wanted to see one of those."

Why had I thought I'd be able to discuss this with Tasha? What I really needed was to talk to Larissa, but I didn't know if we'd ever be able to talk again after our fight. If I chose Kegan, I'd definitely never talk to her again. She'd never forgive me.

"Tasha, come on. That's not exactly the issue here."

"So what is? Sounds like you kissed for a while and had a good time. Big deal."

"I'm thinking about leaving Ian!"

That got her attention. It got mine too. She stared at me, and I stared back as my words echoed in my head. That was what this was all about. Was I or was I not going to leave Ian for Kegan? I'd known it, of course, but hearing it said shocked me.

"I can't believe you just said that," she said, her eyes wide.

"Neither can I." I felt tears rising, and forced them back down. I didn't have time for them. "But it's true."

"Tell me what happened, then. It's not the kissing, is it? I mean, that's not why you want to-- you're thinking about--" She broke off, turning her hands palms up. "I can't even say it."

"No, that's not why. It was amazing, but I'm not that stupid. It's everything else."

Tasha furrowed her brow. "What everything else? I thought you and Ian were good, no?"

I pulled my shoulders up to my ears and dropped them, feeling hopelessness sweep through me. "I thought so too. But if we're okay, then why would I be thinking about Kegan like that?"

"Because Ian's away and you're lonely?" Her tone implied there could be no other explanation.

I wasn't so sure. "It's not just that, though. I think Kegan really wants me back."

"Who cares what he wants? What do *you* want?"

I looked at her for a long moment before shaking my head slowly. "I have no idea."

She looked even more stunned than before. "You're that evenly split between the two of them? Between the guy who broke your heart and your husband?"

Put like that, it made no sense, but... "Kegan's really changed. I think it could work now."

"So what?"

I rubbed my eyes. "So maybe we're supposed to be together."

"What about Ian?"

"I don't know."

"Did you sleep with Kegan?"

"No! We were definitely heading in that direction, but I stopped it, so no."

"I think you should."

I spilled my own coffee that time. I'd been reaching for it, and my hand jerked and hit the cup when I realized what she'd said. Fortunately, the cup was half empty so the cleanup wasn't as intense as last time.

As I mopped up the spill, I said, "You think I should sleep with him." A shiver slid down my spine at the thought. The intensity of those kisses, going so much further. I pushed it out of my mind. "Why?"

"Because I don't think this is real."

"He said--"

"I'm sure he did. And he might even mean it. And you might even be falling for him again. But I bet a lot of it is just physical. If you sleep with him, you'd get that stuff out of your system and you'd be able to think better."

"And then what, I tell Ian I slept with Kegan to save our marriage?"

"No, you don't tell Ian anything."

"I can't do something like that and not tell him. That's horrible."

"Wouldn't telling him you're leaving him be kind of horrible too?"

I leaned back in my chair. "Yes."

"Then don't do it. Just stay with him."

I felt my heart leap and pain shoot through me at the same time. "But I want Kegan too."

"Pretty sure you can't have them both. Unless you're going to have Ian and keep Kegan on the side, and I don't think you want to do that."

I shook my head. "Neither of them deserves that."

"I know I don't know Kegan, but from what you and Larissa have said about him, I can't see why you're even considering him."

"It ended badly, but we were really good together. Maybe we could be again."

"But you're married," Tasha said.

"I *know*! That's why I don't know what to do," I said, frustration growing in me. "You know what, forget it. I'll figure it out myself." I stood up and grabbed my purse.

Tasha caught my arm. "Don't go."

"Why not? This isn't helping," I snapped, then felt remorse flood me at the hurt look on her face.

I sat down again. "Tash, I'm sorry. I really am. It's totally not your fault. I'm just so screwed up."

"I want to help. I just don't know what to do."

"That makes two of us," I said, and we smiled sadly at each other then sat in silence.

"Want another coffee?"

I nodded. "As long as we can manage not to spill it."

"Have faith," she said, then patted me awkwardly on the hand and left the table.

Have faith. In what? Kegan really having changed? Ian understanding what happened and still loving me? My ability to make the choice between them? I didn't exactly feel full of faith at the moment.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I'd made lots of decisions in my life, big ones and little ones. I just had to follow the same process and I'd be fine. I thought back, searching for the last time I'd made a serious decision. Thought back. And back.

When Tasha returned, a coffee cup in each hand and a small paper bag dangling from her mouth, I started talking before she could set down her purchases.

"How do you make decisions? I don't know how to do it."

She put a cup in front of me and removed the bag from her mouth, then pulled a cookie from the bag and handed it to me. Taking her seat again, she took a sip of her coffee, her eyes thoughtful.

I waited, shredding a napkin into tiny pieces, until finally she said, "I just do what feels right."

"Feels right? What do you mean?"

"I imagine myself doing something, and I see how it makes me feel."

"That's it? You don't think about all the reasons for it or against it, or what other people will think, or anything like that?" It seemed too simple.

She shook her head. "If it feels right, then it is. It always works." Leaning forward, she added, "Try it right now."

"What, here? I can't."

"Just do it. Close your eyes." When I had reluctantly done so, she added, "Okay, you're with Kegan. You're only with him. There's no other man in your life."

"But there is," I protested, opening my eyes. "I can't just pretend Ian's gone."

"You can for this. Eyes closed. Just try it!"

I sat in silence, letting myself really imagine being with Kegan. Waking up beside him every morning, eating dinner at his restaurant, getting to know him all over again. We'd probably be out nearly every night, trying different restaurants and clubs, and we'd have a lot of fun together.

There'd be a lot of passion too, if last night meant anything. I felt my heart speed up at the thought of making love with Kegan whenever I wanted, and I opened my eyes rather than dwell on it.

"Well?"

I considered. "It felt pretty good."

"Just good? Tell me about it."

"I think we'd go out a lot. Restaurants, that sort of thing."

"But how does it *feel*?"

I closed my eyes for a moment, letting my Kegan-filled existence wash over me. "Exciting," I said, opening my eyes. "Every day would be different and new."

"Gotcha. Now, Ian."

I closed my eyes again and brought Ian into my mind. The sadness of his parents' death rushed in, but I put it aside. That wasn't what our relationship was about. But what *was* it about?

I thought, "I'm with Ian," and felt a gentle warmth shimmer through me. We'd stay home a lot watching movies and playing with Ninja, and have long talks about everything from the latest episode of CSI to whether we believed in reincarnation.

The warm glow intensified as I thought about our lovemaking pre-Christmas. Ian wanted it most when we had the time to take it slow and enjoy it, so we didn't make love as often as I sometimes wished we did, but when it happened, it was always--

The ringing of my cell phone made me jump and open my eyes. I pulled it from my purse and checked the screen.

"Answer it if you want."

I shook my head and held out the phone so that she could see the caller's name.

"You don't want to talk to him? I'd have figured you would."

"I do," I admitted, dropping the phone back into my purse, "but I told him I didn't want to see him until Monday."

"A phone call isn't seeing," Tasha said. "Does it feel right to answer it?"

As I considered, the phone stopped ringing. "So much for that," I said.

"You want to know why he called, don't you?" Tasha said, giving me a sly smile.

"If you want to know, I can check if he left a message."

Tasha said, "The question is, do *you* want to know? Don't put it off on me."

I stared at her, angry for a second and then stunned. "That's what I do, isn't it?"

Tasha clearly hadn't meant her comment as seriously as I'd taken it. I looked into her puzzled eyes. "I put everything onto everyone else, I let everyone else decide."

"No, you don't. You pick all sorts of things. You picked that car," she said, jerking her head in the direction of the parking lot where my car sat.

"But I didn't, not really. I just saw it and liked it."

"That's still making a decision. Even if you didn't think about it, you still chose."

"I guess so." I'd thought I'd had something, something meaningful, but I was fast losing touch with my point.

"So, decide. Do you want to know if he left a message?"

I looked at her, unsure. I *did* want to know, but I was also scared of how I'd feel hearing his voice.

"If he did, you can play it for me," she said, giving me a smile. "I've never heard him."

I grabbed the phone from my purse. It did have a message, so I dialed the voicemail number, and after a few button presses was listening to Kegan's voice.

Heat spread through me and I couldn't keep a smile from growing on my face.

"Push seven," I said as I handed her the phone. She raised her eyebrows several times and giggled once as she listened, and fanned herself jokingly at the end.

"Sexy voice," she said, holding out the phone. I took it, held it for a second, then gave her a sheepish smile and listened to the message again.

"Candy, I know we're not supposed to see each other until Monday, but I can't stop thinking about you. I just wanted to tell you that. Of course, if you've changed your mind about not seeing me, call me. Actually, call me either way if you want to. I love talking to you. And I had an idea. I think we should go out this week. Oh wait, that's not how to ask a woman out. Candy, would you go out with me? Maybe Tuesday night? I'll take you out for dinner and anywhere else you want to go. I hear Paris is lovely this time of year. Anyhow, I'll see you on Monday. Have a good weekend."

Kegan paused at the end and I'd thought he was finished, but then he added, his voice low and intimate, "I miss you. I hope you're thinking about us. I know I am."

I deleted the message, put the phone back in my purse, and took a sip of my coffee before looking up at Tasha. She was grinning at me.

"You look like a fifteen-year-old talking to her first boyfriend." She peered at me. "Are you blushing?"

"Maybe," I said, putting as much dignity as I could into my voice. "And I was eighteen when we got together. So, what do you think?"

"Pick me up a nice present in Paris."

We laughed, and I said, "I'll keep that in mind. What else?"

Her face turned serious. "He sounds like he really does want you back. I didn't think he meant it, but he sure sounds like he does." She frowned. "He's actually pressuring you a bit though, I think."

"Yeah?" I hadn't thought so.

"Well, trying to get you to go out with him. You shouldn't be seeing him alone like that, not while you're still..." She waved her wedding ring finger at me.

I had to laugh. "Tash, I've had lunch and coffee with him a few times, dinner out once, and we spent the evening at Wonderland together a few weeks ago. I've been seeing him alone for a while now." But she was right, I shouldn't have been. If I hadn't...

"Then I guess it's okay," she said, starting slowly but seeming to gain confidence as she spoke. "Yeah, it's okay. You're just doing the same thing you were before."

Kegan's invitation for Tuesday night didn't feel like he was seeing it as just another outing. If I said yes to it, was I saying yes to everything?

Once I got home, I tried to sit down and relax, but with so many thoughts and emotions coursing through me I just couldn't. I realized I hadn't been to the gym for a while, so I changed clothes and headed out.

I worked away steadily on the elliptical machine, then did the weights circuit. I was still breathing hard and feeling the exertion in my muscles, but the vicious exhaustion that my earlier workouts had caused wasn't there any more. I was actually enjoying working out.

As I lounged in the whirlpool afterwards, I thought about my plans for the evening. I had none. Did I want some? Specifically, did I want to see Kegan?

I closed my eyes and tried Tasha's approach. *Does it feel right to see Kegan tonight?* I felt vivid energy swirl through me as I imagined returning his call, hearing his voice, meeting him somewhere, feeling his arms around me, his kiss...

My eyes popped open. There couldn't be any more kisses. Not until... unless... I chose him. Every time I kissed him, it made my transgression worse, and also made it harder to really choose between them. Kegan had said he was okay with not having the physical stuff right now, but then he'd still kissed me in the car. Maybe he wasn't okay with it. I couldn't see him if he wasn't. But if he *was* okay....

I clambered out of the whirlpool, showered and dressed as fast as I could, and

was pulling out my cell phone as I stepped out onto the street.

"Hi there." His voice was warm, and yet also somehow restrained.

"Hi. I need to talk to you."

"Okay, shoot." There was a lot of noise in the background, people laughing and talking.

"Where are you?"

"At a friend's house. We're having dinner tonight."

I heard, "Whoever it is, invite him over too" faintly through the phone.

"I'll be right back," Kegan said, not into the phone, and I heard the background noise gradually getting quieter until there was silence.

"Okay, I'm outside. What did you want to talk about?"

Faced with such an abrupt question, I couldn't remember. Why had I called him?

"I got your message. I guess I'm just calling back."

"I thought maybe you'd made your decision."

"Oh! No, not yet. I... ummm... you said you were okay with the no physical stuff. Are you?"

"Until you make up your mind, yes."

"So you won't try to kiss me or anything?"

"I won't do anything you don't want."

"Right," I said slowly. He hadn't done anything yet that I hadn't wanted. That was pretty much the problem. "I need you not to kiss me, even if you think I want to. Can you do that?"

"Of course, as long as you won't think I don't want you any more."

I swallowed hard. "I won't."

"Good. Because nothing could be further from the truth."

I'd reached the subway station's entrance, but there was no way I was ending this call right now. I found a bench a little further along so I wouldn't be bothered by the people moving in and out, and sat down in the sunshine.

"Really?"

"Let me come get you and I'll show you."

A heat that had nothing to do with the sun filled me. "Tell me what you'd do."

There was a brief pause before he said, "I'd rather show you."

"You can't. Tell me," I said, knowing I shouldn't be doing this but enjoying the banter.

"Remember last night? In the car?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"I want to kiss you like that for hours. And you have no idea how much I want to make love to you."

His voice dropped on the last few words, dark and intimate and richer than sin, and I remembered that kiss and tried to imagine hours of it. I wouldn't know my own name.

He cleared his throat. "But I can't, so yes, I promise to behave myself."

"Okay," I said, wishing I hadn't brought it up. I'd been thinking enough about being with him before; now I could almost feel his hands on me, his kisses...

"What about the rest of my message? Tuesday night?"

I swallowed hard. I should say no. I had to choose Ian. We were married. I had to choose Ian and let Kegan go and move on with my same old life. I had to pick Ian.

"Yes. I'd like that."

"I'm glad. Where do you want to go?"

"Wherever you want to take me."

"Really? Wherever?"

I had to laugh. "Within the guidelines, yes."

"That takes all the fun out of it," he said in what I hoped was a mock whiny voice.

"Does it?"

"Not even close, Candy. Not even close."

We were silent for a moment, then I said, "I should let you go. You need to get back to your friends."

"Can I see you tonight?"

I licked my lips. "No. We said Monday."

"They're our rules, Candy, we can change them whenever we want."

"I don't want to change it."

"Okay," he said. "I'll see you Monday then."

Surprised by the sudden turnaround, I said, "Are you sure?"

I could hear a smile in his voice as he said, "I'm not going to pressure you. You know how I feel, and if you don't let me know because I'd be happy to tell you in more detail. I know it's a big decision for you, and I don't want to force you. You have to do what you think will make you happy."

At that precise moment, making love with Kegan seemed like a surefire way to make me happy. I had to think more long-term though.

"What I can say, though," he went on, "is that I'll do everything in my power to

give you a great life. I want to take care of you, help you in your career in any way I can, and never make you cry again. I..."

The pause seemed endless as I waited for him to finish the sentence. He couldn't be going to say what I--

"Candy, I love you. I do. Give me the chance to show you."

Tears filled my eyes. Even if I'd been able to speak, I wouldn't have had anything to say. I couldn't tell him I loved him, not while I was still married to Ian. And I didn't know if I did. I knew I *could*, and it wouldn't take much to make it happen. But I didn't know yet if I really felt it.

"I'll see you on Monday, okay?"

"Okay," I managed to get out.

"Take care of yourself."

"You too."

"I love you, Candy."

And he was gone, leaving the words to echo in my head.

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacatocks@hotmail.com

Subject: Sorry

Sorry I didn't email last night. I went out to Light with some of the girls from work (Allyson's idea, of course) and by the time I got home I was in no shape to send email.

You're right, the time has gone really fast. You'll be home in a week.

C.

Sunday, August 21st

On any other Sunday, I would have been meeting Larissa for lunch, but even though we hadn't discussed it I knew it wouldn't be happening. I ate alone, at home, watching television. Once I'd finished eating, I picked up my crocheting, losing myself in the beauty of the yarn and trying not to think.

After a while, I realized that I *had* to think. Tasha had told me I'd just know which one was right, but that hadn't worked. I had to try something else. I had to decide, and soon.

Or did I? Would I be better to wait until Ian came back and then make the decision? I'd been assuming I had to know before he returned, but maybe that wasn't fair to him.

No, I had to decide before he got back, because I couldn't pick him up at the airport not knowing whether I still wanted to be with him. If it wasn't him, I had to tell him beforehand.

Tasha's airy-fairy method hadn't worked. Again I wished I could call Larissa. There was no way, though. She probably wouldn't be willing to even look at me once she knew what I'd done as it was, and if I chose Kegan instead of Ian, I was also choosing to end my friendship with Larissa.

For what seemed like the billionth time since Ian left, tears filled my eyes. I didn't want to lose Larissa. But was that enough of a reason to choose Ian? It was definitely a point in his favor.

I grabbed my notebook and a pen from my work bag and drew up a little chart. I had to make this very scientific, take all the emotion out of it, and maybe then I'd be able to choose.

I wrote 'Topic' at the top of the first column, then put Ian's name at the top of the second column, and Kegan's on the third. "Will I still be friends with Larissa?" was the first entry in the topic column, and I put the number ten under Ian's name and a big round zero under Kegan's.

How was this going to help? I'd just have a list of issues, and I still wouldn't know who to choose. I stared at the chart for a while, then added another column, 'Weighting'. Not everything was the same level of importance, after all. I would give each topic a weighting, then determine the rating for each man, and then add it up and know who to choose.

I spent two hours on the project, thinking hard about what really mattered to me. I added issue after issue, ranging from "making my mother happy" to "good in bed" to "lots to talk about", and assigned weights to them all. Once I had all my issues, I went back and forth rating Ian and Kegan. I didn't do both of their ratings for the same issue together; I was trying to rate them individually rather than compare them. They were receiving very different scores, but I refused to allow myself to keep track so I could see who was winning.

At last the chart was full of numbers, ratings and weightings. I started out trying to do the math in my head, but quickly gave up and found a calculator. I calculated all of the scores, then added up Ian's total.

Eighty-one.

My heart sped up as I added Kegan's scores. And re-added. And re-added.

Eighty-one, every time.

I spent the afternoon curled up on the couch staring at the television. Not watching it, just staring blankly and struggling to think of my next move.

"Maybe I should flip a coin," I said to Ninja, passed out and snoring at my side. He didn't respond.

Was I really considering making the biggest decision of my life based on a coin toss? I couldn't do that. But what *could* I base it on? Imagining being with Kegan filled me with excitement. Ian, at least the pre-Christmas Ian, made me feel warm and protected. They scored exactly the same on my little test. Short of setting up a timeshare thing where I spent alternate months with each, how was I going to resolve this?

I *had* to talk to Larissa. She wouldn't want to hear from me, but I needed her. She had a real way of cutting through all the fluff around an issue, and there was more fluff around this one than in all my stuffed polar bears.

I picked up my cell phone and turned it absently in my hand, thinking. If I phoned her, she'd probably just hang up. I could send her a text message. At least that way if she was furious I'd only have to read it instead hearing it.

Larissa always complained about people sending her text messages with short forms of words ("We're turning into a bunch of illiterate fools!") so I made sure to spell out every word. It took a long time to figure out exactly what to say, but at last I had it ready. I gave it a final re-read before sending it off.

"I need your help. I've screwed up. Kegan wants me back and I don't know what I want. I know you're mad and I deserve it. But can I talk to you?"

I pushed the 'send' button and set the phone down on the coffee table. Right next to the little bear Ian had given me at the airport.

I reached out and stroked the bear's soft fur, then brought it over to sit on my lap. It really was adorable. Exactly the kind of bear I liked. I snuggled it into my shoulder and closed my eyes, trying to draw comfort from it. Ian had touched it.

As the first tear fell onto the bear, my cell phone signaled the arrival of a message. When I'd checked it, the tears came in earnest.

"If you're even considering being with him there's nothing I can say to you."

I fired back, "That's why I need you. Because I can't stop considering it."

The bear was rather damp by the time the phone rang. I looked at the screen and fought back the tears.

"Hi."

"What the *hell* are you doing?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me."

"Kegan says he wants me back. He says... he said he loves me."

There was silence for so long that I took the phone away from my ear to see if I'd lost the connection. It didn't look like it. I put the phone back to my ear in time to hear her say, "--ass what he wants. And I can't understand why you care either. Are you actually stupid enough to fall for this?"

"He means it."

"Oh, he does not. He figures he'll get you to sleep with him, and then he'll dump you. Unless you already *have* slept with him?"

"No!"

"I bet he's asked, though."

"He hasn't. He wants to take care of me."

"There's nothing you can say to convince me he's got your best interests at heart. Unlike Ian, who definitely does. What is *wrong* with you?"

"I don't know," I said, dissolving into tears.

"And what do you want me to say? 'Oh, go ahead, be with Kegan, it'll all be great?' He's going to rip you apart, just like the last time, and I don't want to see it."

"It's different this time," I managed to get out.

"Listen to yourself, crying over Kegan yet again." The scorn in her voice was hard to take. "It's no different. The only thing that's different this time is that you're going to break Ian's heart."

I was sobbing too hard to answer this. What had I expected her to say? She would never see Kegan as anything but the jerk who'd hurt me all those years ago. He *had* changed, but she would never believe it. I knew he was different. I knew it.

She sighed. "I can't do this. When you've come to your senses and realized he's bad for you, call me. Until then, there's nothing I can do."

I've never heard a louder sound than the click of the phone as she hung up on me.

After I'd cried for a while longer, I dragged myself upstairs and into the shower. The scalding hot water turned me pink and left me feeling drained and strangely at peace. There was nothing left to do. I'd lost Larissa. I was going to lose Ian too, and probably Tasha once Larissa got hold of her. I couldn't fight any more.

Wrapped in my bathrobe, I called Kegan. "I think I've made up my mind."

"I'll be right over."

And for the second time that day, someone hung up on me. I stared at the phone. I hadn't meant for him to come over. Had I even meant what I'd said?

Either way, I had to get dressed. I scrubbed my hair with a towel, put on the first clothes I could find, and gave myself a quick layer of makeup.

I was sitting on the couch, feeling nervous enough to throw up, when Kegan rang the doorbell. When I opened the door, we stood looking at each other for a long moment. I wanted to throw myself into his arms and run away at the same time.

"Can I come in?" He was already moving forward, so my "No!" caught him off-guard.

"No?"

I shook my head. "Can we go for a drive?" I couldn't let him into Ian's house.

He looked confused, but led me back to his car and got me settled in the passenger seat. By the time he'd gone around to the driver's side, I was in tears.

"Candy, what's wrong?"

He put his arm around my shoulder and pulled me toward him. I cried into his chest for a long moment, then looked up at him. "You're ruining my life."

I hadn't meant to say it, but as the words came out I knew I meant them. He swallowed hard. "Why?"

"Larissa hates me."

"Not a surprise, I guess. You told her?"

"I told her I was thinking about it."

"Not that you've decided?"

I looked into his eyes. "I haven't decided."

"But you said--"

"I thought I had," I said, the words tumbling over each other, "but when I saw you I knew I haven't. I still don't know what I want."

Kegan still had his arm around me, but I felt the distance between us grow. "Don't do this, Candy. I know it's a hard decision for you, but don't jerk me around. Once you decide, that needs to be it. You can't keep changing your mind."

"I know. I won't. Just this time."

He sighed. "If I were a better person, I guess I'd leave and make the decision for you. I can't, though. I want to be with you. I'm not going to leave until you tell me to."

He brushed the tears from my cheek with the back of his hand. "Are you telling me to leave?"

I looked into his eyes and felt my head begin to move from side to side. It picked up speed, and I said, "No. Not yet. I don't want you to go."

He took my face in both hands, fingertips gently caressing me. "It'll all work out. You'll see."

I couldn't see how, but as he pulled me into his arms and I dropped my head to his shoulder, I hoped he was right.

We drove around for nearly two hours, just aimlessly taking different roads and talking. Some of the time we talked about us, about what our lives would be like if I chose him, and I noticed that Kegan never used the word 'if'.

"Do you want to live in my condo, or should we sell it and buy something else?"

"How do you think your parents will react?"

"When it's all settled, I think we should go away for a few weeks. I've never done an Alaskan cruise. That'll be fun, don't you think?"

I answered all his questions ("Whatever you think", "No idea", "Sure"), and it was becoming more and more real to me that we might end up together. When I was at home alone, I knew I still loved Ian. When I was with Kegan, though, it was so hard to keep Ian in my mind. Ian was fading while Kegan became even brighter and more distinct.

We talked about other things too, about his restaurant and his plans to eventually make it a chain, and about my career. I admitted that I did want to be a designer, and felt joy shimmer through me as I said the words out loud for the first time. He squeezed my hand, and said he knew I could do anything I wanted to do.

At the end of the night, Kegan brought me home, and we sat in the car for a few minutes, arranging what time to meet in the morning at the restaurant. Once that was finished, he said, "I love you, Candy."

I looked up at him and said nothing. Our eyes met briefly before he turned his

head to stare out the window.

"I can't say it." My voice was barely a whisper.

"I know. I just wish you could."

I sighed and picked up my purse. "Good night."

"Candy, wait. I'm sorry. It's just hard on me too, you know?"

I turned in my seat to face him. "I know. I'm trying."

He stroked my cheek gently, and I leaned into his hand, feeling sweet warmth and awakening desire flowing into me. "Take your time. When you decide, I want you to be sure."

I nodded. "I will be." I had to be.

He withdrew his hand, kissed his fingertips, and pressed them to my forehead. "See you tomorrow."

I wanted a real kiss, but I forced myself to get out of the car instead. I didn't know how I was going to make the decision, but basing it on how Kegan's kisses made me feel was a particularly bad method.

Safely in the house, I logged into the computer, both hoping for and dreading an email from Ian, or Larissa.

The inbox was empty.

I shut down the computer. I had nothing to say, nothing to say to anyone.

I changed into my pajamas and went back downstairs, intending to collapse on the couch and focus on nothing but my crocheting. My cell phone beeped as I entered the living room. I'd left it on the table when I took my shower and had forgotten to bring it with me on my drive with Kegan. Who'd called me?

"Hmm, you're not answering this either. I'll give you a bit and try the home number again."

Ian sounded a little confused, and maybe a tiny bit worried, but not upset. I, on

the other hand, was devastated by his words. I'd forgotten about his phone call. How could I have done that?

I picked up the home phone. Two messages.

"Hey, Candice, it's me. I'm a bit early but I really wanted to talk to you so I thought I'd call. I'll wait until nine your time and try again."

"Okay, I have to go to work now and you're still not home. I think this isn't going to happen. I'm sorry about that, because... Candice, I want you to know how much I love you. I haven't been telling you enough lately, and I definitely haven't been showing you, but I do. I said and did some pretty unforgivable stuff after my parents died, but I hope you can forgive me anyhow. I know, I always knew, it wasn't even close to being your fault, and I'm so sorry I said that. I'm hoping for a fresh start after I get home. I love you. Email me when you get a chance, okay? Bye."

I dropped onto the couch and closed my eyes, too shocked even to cry. All the things I'd wanted to hear for months. He'd finally said them, and I had no idea what to do with them.

There'd be a fresh start, for sure.

One way or the other.

I turned my crochet hook around in my fingers. What was I going to do?

In the end, I did the only thing I could do. I crocheted. On and on for hours, the need to keep the yarn clean and dry stopping me from giving way to the tears that wanted to fall yet again. My wrist grew sore, my fingers ached, but I kept going. Until I put in the last stitch. The shawl was complete.

I wrapped it around my shoulders. It was an odd combination, my green fuzzy night shirt and the sleek silk yarn, but even so, I could tell I'd created exactly what I'd hoped for, a thing of beauty. The various shades of blue in the yarn blended beautifully. Ian would love it.

Would he get to see it?

Monday, August 22nd

After a near-sleepless night, I reached Steel about five minutes before nine, but Kegan was already there, inspecting the painting that had been done over the weekend. When I opened the door, he glanced over, and his face lit up when he realized it was me.

A pang of something very close to love struck me at his expression. He hadn't been lying; he was in love with me, or getting there at any rate, and if I chose Ian I was going to hurt him, just as choosing Kegan would hurt Ian. No matter what I did, someone was going to suffer.

Overwhelmed by the realization, I fled the restaurant, Kegan hot on my heels. Outside, away from his workers, I turned back and threw my arms around his neck. He pulled me to him and wrapped his arms around me. I snuggled my cheek into his chest, breathing in his scent, searching for comfort. Unlike the other times he'd held me, though, I didn't find any.

I drew away first, and he looked down into my eyes. "How are you?"

Forcing a smile, I said, "I'm all right. You?"

"Just fine. Look, about tomorrow night, I remembered this morning that I have a meeting with my accountant at five and it'll be a long one. Are you free tonight instead?"

I thought for a second. "Actually, yes." With my crocheting complete, the thought of being at home all evening was unbearable.

He smiled. "Great. Can I pick you up at seven?"

"You don't want to just go from here?"

He shook his head. "I need to go home and change."

"You look good to me," I said before I could stop myself. He did, though. Blue jeans and a black t-shirt, making the blue of his eyes even more intense.

I was surprised to see his cheeks turn slightly pink. I'd never made him blush before. "Thanks," he said, "but I still want to change into something a little

nicer."

"Okay. Where are we going? Do I need to change too?"

He ran his eyes slowly over me, from head to toe. "You're perfect."

Once we went back into the restaurant, we were all business, and we stayed that way until just before noon when my cell phone's alarm went off.

"Do you have a meeting?"

I shook my head. "I just didn't want to forget to go to the office. I need to check my email."

"I'll take you if you'd like. We can get lunch on the way."

"No, that's okay," I said. "I might be there for a while, and I don't want to put you out."

"I don't mind." He smiled at me.

I took a deep breath. "Actually, I'd prefer to go alone."

He rocked back slightly as if I'd pushed him away. I hastened to explain. "I just don't know how long I'll be, and Lou might want to talk to me, and--"

"It's okay, Candy. I have a lot of work to do anyhow. I'll see you when you get back?"

I nodded and escaped to the street. I walked to the office, feeling a strange satisfaction. I had said what I wanted. And I'd got it. It felt like I'd never done that before. But of course I had. I'd done it at Ikea, for one. Gone in, picked what I wanted, and brought it home. And I'd done it lots of other times. Hadn't I?

Why couldn't I think of any?

I had planned my trip to the office carefully, terrified of seeing anyone who'd been at Light with me on Friday. Allyson was the only one who'd seen me leave

with Kegan, but she'd probably told everyone. I'd have to see them eventually, but if I could avoid it even for a few days, it would be nice.

As I'd hoped, when I got to the office everyone was on lunch. I sat down at my desk in the silent room and started up my computer. In a few minutes, Tigger told me I had email.

To: canw@sapphireinteriordesign.com

From: allyj@sapphireinteriordesign.com

Subject: Status Report

Just wanted to let you know a few things.

1. I told the others that you had a really bad headache and had to go home. They were sorry you weren't there, but nobody seemed suspicious.
2. If you want to talk, drop me an email or come by and say you want to discuss my status report. I'd be happy to go to lunch with you or meet you somewhere.
3. I hope you're okay. That was all pretty intense.

Allyson

I read the email several times. It wasn't remotely what I'd come to expect from Allyson. No happy faces, no flakiness, and a good cover of my sudden disappearance on Friday night.

Did I want to have lunch with her? We'd never been friends, but she was the only one who'd seen what had happened, and maybe talking to her would be helpful. On the other hand, did I want to tell a coworker, and one I wasn't so sure about at that, about everything?

I shut my eyes for a second and told myself, "I am going out for lunch with Allyson." It felt good, like it was the right thing to do. I opened my eyes and sent a reply.

To: allyj@sapphireinteriordesign.com

From: canw@sapphireinteriordesign.com

Subject: Re: Status Report

Thanks, Allyson. Lunch would be good. Are you free tomorrow (Tuesday)? I should be in the office tomorrow morning to find out, or you can send a text message to my cell phone.

Thanks for what you told them. I appreciate it.

C.

Just as I pressed the 'send' button, Lou's office door opened. "Candice, do you have a second?"

"Of course."

He held the door open for me, then closed it and sat down behind his desk.

"Richard, in his infinite wisdom, just took on another client."

"*Another* one? Oh, good. I was wondering what we'd do with all our free time."

Lou nodded. "That's more or less what I said to Richard. I'm sure you'll be shocked to learn he didn't care."

"Shocked," I said, smiling at his aggravated expression.

"My wife has the car for the week, off visiting her mother in Montreal, and Jim's restaurant isn't really accessible by subway. Is there any way you could drive us there?"

"I don't have the car here today. I could go get it, but it'll take--"

Lou waved me off. "No, it's tomorrow afternoon. At two, unless I call him to change it."

"Sure, I can drive in tomorrow," I said.

"Okay, good. Can you be ready to leave at one? I want to make sure we're not late."

"No problem."

Kegan picked me up at home right at seven. When I saw him, wearing a sleek black suit, I was glad I'd changed into the dress I'd worn a few months ago to Larissa's work party, teal-green with a halter top and a straight skirt that ended just above my knees. We looked like we belonged together.

My new shawl would have been perfect for the dress, but I wore an older one instead, one I'd made from a delicate black mohair. I hadn't thought of a shawl at all until Kegan rang the doorbell, and then I'd rushed past the new one to grab the black as I left my bedroom.

Kegan stepped back and made a production of checking me out. Shaking his head, he said, "Every time I see you, you look even better. How do you do that?"

I looked him over, imitating his blatant scan of my body. "I could say the same thing to you."

He held out his hand. "Are you ready to go?"

I locked the door and walked past him down the sidewalk. I didn't want to take his hand, not on my front steps.

By nine o'clock, I'd had more wine than was good for me, and was warm and happy. Kegan had taken me to Setherwood ("because I heard you say you love it") and we were ensconced in a cozy corner. He sat beside me, our knees occasionally touching beneath the table, and we'd shared an appetizer and were now waiting for our meals.

"I can't believe you've never had lobster before today," he said. "How is that even possible?"

I shrugged. "It's a mystery of life," I said, waving an arm in a grand gesture.

He smiled at me. "Are you drunk?"

"That's a mystery too."

His arm slipped around my shoulder. "No, that's a fact. They're different."

"Are not."

He laughed. "You don't even know what you're arguing about."

"Lobsters," I said triumphantly.

"If you say so. Whatever you say, dear."

"Exactly. There you go."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, Candy, but I love you," he said, squeezing me closer to him.

It was on the tip of my tongue to say, "I love you too." In the haze of the alcohol and the food and the closeness, just for a second, I did love him. I took a breath to say it, but instead I dropped my head to his shoulder and didn't say a word. He held me tight until our waiter arrived with our food.

We were toying with the last remnants of our desserts when Kegan cleared his throat. "I've got something for you." He pulled a small silver box from his jacket pocket and passed it across the table to me.

For a second, I couldn't bring myself to open it. He couldn't be giving me anything that I could keep if I chose Ian, and I didn't want to hurt him by giving his present back. He'd gone out and bought this for me, though, and I couldn't reject him right here.

I untied the ribbon and removed the top of the box. Inside, nestled into soft white cotton, was a tiny crystal polar bear, barely an inch long. I plucked it out and stood it on the table in front of me, then leaned in to look at it more closely. It was perfect in every detail, and so delicate I was afraid to touch it again. I did, though, running a finger gently over its cold back.

"It's gorgeous," I said, looking up at him. "You shouldn't have."

"I know, but I wanted to." He put his hand over mine. "I figured if you didn't choose me, it was small enough that it could stay with you." His thumb circled

gently on the back of my hand and shivers rippled through me.

He said my name, and the yearning in his voice made me weak. "I need you to choose," he said, looking into my eyes. "I love you. I think you could love me. Am I right?"

I swallowed hard. "Yes," I whispered.

Yes, I could. I could love Kegan again.

He brushed a strand of hair from my cheek. "That's all I need for now."

Sitting in his car outside my house, we looked at each other in silence. At last, he said, "Is the no kiss rule still in effect?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

"Then consider yourself kissed," he said, his eyes on my lips. I could almost feel his mouth on mine, warm and tender, possessing me. He put his hand on the back of my neck, and just his touch nearly made me lose control. I swayed slightly toward him before pulling myself back as if from an open flame.

"I have to go," I said, my voice sounding strange in my own ears.

"Let me kiss you." The words seemed to burst from him. As soon as he'd said them, he was shaking his head. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to say that. It's just... God, I just want you so much. It's killing me."

I licked my lips, and felt heat flash through me as his eyes fastened on my mouth again. If I let him kiss me, it would be the end. I'd be making the decision right here, right now, because that kiss would lead to us making love, and that would be the end of my marriage.

He touched my cheek, and I turned my head and kissed the palm of his hand. Then, before I could change my mind, I grabbed my purse and fled.

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacatocks@hotmail.com

Subject: Glad to hear from you

I was a bit surprised not to hear from you yesterday, but it's okay. I know you're really busy trying to finish up before next weekend.

Lou and I have yet another new client tomorrow. I have to drive us to see him. Lou's going to hate my car, I just know it.

Ninja says hi. All my polar bears say hi. I say, come home. Please. I miss you.

C.

Tuesday, August 23rd

Kegan had meetings all morning, so I stayed in the office and caught up on some of the work I'd been neglecting. I had to answer a few questions about my 'headache' on Friday night, but thanks to Allyson I was prepared and said I'd felt better as soon as I got home.

She came by my desk around eleven-thirty. "Are we going to talk about that report?"

I nodded. "I have to be ready to leave here at one though. Can we talk soon?"

"Sure. Why don't we go for lunch? In two minutes, maybe?"

If I hadn't known, I'd never have guessed we'd already agreed to have lunch together. "Sounds good," I said, and she headed back to her desk.

I tidied up mine and made sure my bag was packed for the client meeting, feeling increasingly doubtful about talking to Allyson. It had felt right on Monday, but now I just didn't know what good it would do.

We walked to the food court in near-silence but I could feel her impatience. Somehow, she managed to control herself until we'd both ordered our food and started eating. Then the inquisition began.

"What was the deal?"

"What deal?" I tried.

No dice.

"You know perfectly well what deal. Kegan. The dancing guy. The kissing guy. The--"

"I got it, thanks," I said, not wanting her to bring up any more of my mistakes. "You know he's an ex-boyfriend, and--"

"Didn't look that 'ex' to me."

I dropped the French fry I was holding and glared at her. "What do you want me to say?"

"I--"

"Do you want me to say I'm sorry? I screwed up? Okay, fine. I screwed up. It was a big mistake. I messed up our night... and my marriage... and..."

And just like that, my life-long resolution to never cry at a fast food restaurant went right down the toilet.

Allyson stared at me, aghast. "Don't cry, it's okay."

"It's not okay," I snapped through my tears. "It's terrible."

Allyson passed me a handful of napkins and waited for me to compose myself. It took a few minutes, but I did eventually manage to bring myself back under control.

"Sorry," I muttered.

"Why?" Allyson said, sounding genuinely curious. "You've got nothing to apologize to me for."

"Crying at Dairy Queen..."

"Big deal. Probably not the first time it's happened. Someone probably wanted a plain Oreo cookie milkshake and got a mint Oreo one, and just started bawling."

I gave a slight laugh. Encouraged, she went on.

"And then someone else wanted a banana split without bananas, and the cashier couldn't figure it out, and the guy just cried and cried..."

"Okay, I get it. I'm not the only pathetic person on the planet."

"You're not pathetic at all," Allyson said, sobering. "It must be incredibly hard for you. It was like... well, this'll sound dumb, but it was like he was a ... a huge magnet or something and you were a piece of metal. I could almost see you getting drawn into him."

"Really? He's always made me feel that way."

Allyson looked at me for a moment. "What about Ian?"

I propped my elbows on the table and rested my chin on my hands. "I don't know."

"Are you thinking about going back to Kegan? When were you guys together anyhow?"

I was surprised at first that she wasn't horrified by the thought of my returning to Kegan, but of course she didn't know Ian, and really didn't know me either. She wasn't as invested in the whole thing.

"There's just something about Kegan," I said. "I thought I was over him, but then he came back and now I'm not so sure anymore."

"How old are you?"

Why was she asking me that? Was she even listening? "Thirty-one."

"And you've been married how long?"

"Two years."

She shook her head. "I'm twenty-eight and I'm so not ready to get married."

"We just knew it was right and we didn't want to wait just to be older," I said, and felt sadness stab through me at the memory of how utterly in love with Ian

I'd been, how certain that we would be together forever.

Allyson drew her eyebrows together and looked at her hands, moving her fingers as if she were doing a complicated math problem. "And you dated Kegan for how long?"

"Nearly three years," I said, not sure where she was going.

"Anybody between the two of them?"

I pressed my hand to my forehead in pretend agony. "One moderately good one, and several others, all total jerks. Until I met Ian, I didn't think I'd ever find another decent guy."

Allyson dropped her hands to the table. "So, you've really only been involved with two decent guys, and now they're both here again."

I stared at her. Why hadn't I seen it like that? "That's why it's so hard for me to choose. They're both good guys. They are."

"I'm not arguing with you," she said, flashing me that same bright smile that had so annoyed me in the office. It wasn't quite as annoying now.

"But I have to pick Ian, right? He's my husband."

She shrugged. "Life is short, you know? If Kegan is back and he's good to you and you want him back, maybe he's what you need."

Maybe.

I had cleaned my car to within an inch of its life the night before to make sure that Lou wouldn't in any way be offended. It was a small car, and Lou wasn't exactly a small man; I didn't want to make things worse by having it messy.

He settled himself in the front seat and I drove away as smoothly as I could. He talked about the new client, and all our other projects, and I barely listened, concentrating on the road and making sure that I didn't take a wrong turn somewhere.

We were finally nearly there. One more left turn, then a right turn into the plaza where the restaurant was located, and we could get out of the car. I couldn't wait. Cars flowed steadily past us as we sat in the left turn lane.

The light turned green for us, and I looked in all directions. The first car on the main road was still moving, flying toward the intersection at full speed. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the driver raised his hand in an apologetic wave and the car came on into the intersection.

Came on, and smashed into the side of the car beside me which had moved forward into the intersection.

The sound of shrieking metal seemed to ring out forever, and then there was silence save for one of the car's horns, blaring incessantly.

"What was he doing? He ran that red light. Damn near hit us!" Lou's voice was full of fear and anger. I sat frozen, hardly breathing, dizziness shuddering through me. Lou said something, but I didn't hear it. I couldn't hear anything but one name, echoing through my mind.

Lou caught my arm. "*Candice!*"

I turned my head to him as if it were on rusty gears. "I'm fine." I paused, knowing something else was called for. What did I need to say? Oh, yes. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, undoing his seat belt. "We need to stay here, I think. We're witnesses."

I pulled myself from the car and stood, my hand resting on its mercifully uncrumpled door, staring at the mangled cars in front of me.

"Candice? Okay, that's it, get over here and sit down."

"No, Lou, I'm fine. Really. Just... it was just a shock."

Suddenly knowing, with absolutely no doubt, what I wanted for the rest of my life... it *had* been a shock. My life hadn't flashed before my eyes or anything like that, but everything had changed. It had all become so clear.

There was only one man I wanted to call and tell about what had just happened, one man who could give me comfort and help me make my life extraordinary. The knowledge shimmered through me, body and soul, and nothing would change it. Regardless of what other people thought, I knew what I wanted. For the first time in my life, I really knew.

Now I just had to make it happen.

Lou called 911, and then called Jim to explain why we'd be late, and I stood on the side of the road and watched as the police cars, fire trucks, and ambulance swooped in. The woman who'd been hit had to be cut out of her twisted car, but she didn't seem too badly hurt. The driver who'd caused it all wasn't hurt at all.

I longed to go to Kegan, but instead had to wait until the accident was cleared away and the police had time to talk to us. Lou gave our side of the story, and I confirmed it when the police officer asked me, but otherwise I said nothing. I had nothing to say. Not here, anyhow.

By the time it was all done, we'd been there nearly an hour.

"Jim has another meeting at three, so we're going to come back another day to see him." Lou smiled at me. "Maybe we'll take a different route."

"Or you can drive," I said, unlocking the car doors for us.

"No, I'll let you drive again," Lou said. "If that had been me, I probably would have been in the intersection and been flattened. Good for you for not going. How'd you know?"

I started the car and drove past the few bits of glass in the intersection that were all that remained of the accident. "I looked over and saw he wasn't stopping."

Lou shook his head. "I'm so glad you did. You saved our lives."

When we got back to the office, Lou said, "It's early, but go home, Candice. You're still white as a ghost."

"You know what, I will, if you're sure it's okay."

He nodded. "Have a nice night and take care of yourself."

I left, but I didn't go home.

I parked the car and walked up to Kegan's restaurant on suddenly shaky legs. I still felt the certainty. But what if it didn't feel right any more when I saw him?

I opened the door and went inside. Kegan was at the far end of the main room in the midst of a group of people. He looked up and saw me. Across the room, our eyes met, and joy spread through me. I was still sure.

He left the group and came toward me, slowly at first and then faster; I knew he knew I'd decided. I couldn't drag it out.

I looked into those gorgeous blue eyes and shook my head.

His stride faltered, and he stopped about ten feet away. He stared at me, dawning awareness and a terrible pain in his eyes. I felt tears rising, but they were rising around the solid security of my decision, and they didn't overwhelm me as they had before.

I shook my head again, and mouthed, "I'm sorry". Kegan looked at me, then gave me a slow nod. I turned around and walked away.

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacat rocks@hotmail.com

Subject: I nearly died today

Okay, that might be a bit dramatic, but... I was driving Lou to a client meeting and some moron ran the red light. We were in the left turn lane and if I'd started to make the turn I'd have had an SUV embedded in the side of my poor car. Or in me.

And you know why I didn't go? Because some brilliant man taught me to check every direction before driving into an intersection.

I love you so much, Ian. It's been so weird having you gone, but I do. I love you so much, and I forgive you for everything about your parents. You were upset,

and I knew that. You're right, we can have a fresh start. I can't wait until you get home. It's going to be amazing.

I love you!

C.

Email sent, I fired off a quick text message telling Larissa I'd chosen Ian, then entertained myself for several minutes imagining Ian's return, our joyous meeting at the airport, and the rest of our wonderful lives together. We'd have all I could ask for: passion, love, a relationship that just grew stronger as the years went by, sharing everything...

Everything.

Except one thing.

Ian would never know how close I'd come to leaving him.

I didn't think I could tell him. If I did, it would only make him doubt me, doubt our relationship, and since I'd made my decision and knew it wouldn't change, there was no point to it. Telling him would hurt him, and I didn't want to do anything to hurt him.

I closed my eyes, and tried to imagine telling Ian. Sitting down on the couch with him, watching his face change as I told him, seeing the words sink in as he really understood what had happened, what I'd done. Just the thought sent sick shock waves through me. There was no way. I couldn't do it.

I shook my head to clear it, and began trying to imagine never telling Ian. Hardly anyone knew about it, so he was unlikely to find out. Just Larissa and Tasha, and Allyson, and none of them would tell. And Kegan, of course. But Ian wouldn't believe him over me. So I could keep it a secret. Just never bring it up. Definitely easier on him.

But would it be easier on me? To walk around, full of a secret like that, never knowing whether today would be the day that he would find out. I didn't know if I could do that either. And what if he did find out one day? Then it would be so much worse, because I'd kept it a secret for so long.

I felt another sickening jolt as I realized that I didn't know which part of it would be worse for Ian to hear. I'd kissed Kegan, kissed him repeatedly, but only on that one day. I'd spent nearly a week seriously considering leaving Ian, and allowing myself to imagine being with Kegan. Would Ian be more hurt that Kegan had touched my body or that he'd touched my soul?

My cell phone rang and I felt a flash of relief. Larissa would help me sort it out.

But it wasn't Larissa.

I let the phone ring several times. My hand jerked toward it and away and toward it again. Was there any point in answering it? What could I say?

Finally, my hand jerked toward it again and I answered.

"Candy, I love you."

I could hear the emotion and sincerity in his voice, and I knew he meant it. But I could hear something else too, a thinly veiled frustration. Kegan hated to lose, and he'd lost to Ian.

"I'm not going to change my mind," I said. "I know what I want."

"I can be anything you want. You know I've changed, Candy, you know."

I swallowed hard. "I do know."

"I can be what you need."

I didn't answer. There was no way to say, "No, because Ian's what I need", and that was the only thing I had to say.

"What about Friday night? Are you telling me that wasn't real?"

"It was real," I had to admit. "But it doesn't matter. I'm married, and I'm going to stay that way." And, with any luck, Ian and I could get that fresh start and find our way back to the passion we'd had at the beginning.

The silence stretched to agonizing lengths before he said, "You're sure."

"I am."

He sighed. "Okay. If you change your mind--"

"I won't." I didn't want to leave him with false hope.

"*If* you do, call me. I love you."

I heard someone call his name in the background.

"Just a second!" His voice was sharp, nothing like how it sounded when he said to me, "Take care of yourself, Candy."

"You too," I said, struggling to keep my voice level. I'd never wanted to hurt Kegan.

"Goodbye," he said, and hung up.

I closed my phone and let the tears fall. So much crying while Ian had been away. There shouldn't be any more after this, though; I'd made my decision and we were going to be okay.

My phone rang a few minutes later, and I wiped my eyes, checked the screen, and picked it up right away.

"Good for you," Larissa said. "You've finally come to your senses. Want to have dinner?"

Once we were seated at Setherwood, ironically at the same table that Kegan and I had shared the night before (only the night before? It felt like a lifetime ago), Larissa said, "Tell me everything. I can't understand why you thought he'd changed."

"Because he has changed."

Larissa pushed her chair back. "Don't tell me, you've really picked him. You just said Ian to get me here."

I shook my head. "No, it's Ian. It was always Ian, I just didn't realize." I took a deep breath. I hated confrontation, especially with Larissa, but this had to be done. "But Kegan is different now. I truly believe that. I don't want you to hate

him any more."

"Not up to you," she said, her arms folded across her chest. "I'll always hate him for what he did to you, the mess he left you in."

I looked into her eyes. "I need you to listen to me. Kegan has changed. Yes, he hurt me before. He's different now. I need you to hear me."

Holding her gaze, as her face showed her lack of belief, and disappointment in me for my belief, was the hardest thing I'd ever done in our friendship. I didn't look away, though; I owed Kegan at least this much. Owed myself too. I knew I was right.

At last, she pulled herself closer to the table and said, "I can believe that *you* believe he's changed. I haven't seen any of the proof, so I can't believe it myself. Not yet, anyhow. Is that good enough?"

I nodded. "I'll take it. So, here's what happened..."

And I told her everything. As I talked, I realized how often I'd censored myself in our past conversations, not just about Kegan but about everything, leaving out details that I knew she wouldn't like, trying to show myself in a better light.

This time, though, I gave her the truth. How scared I'd been about my test results, how Kegan had comforted me, what our trip to Wonderland had been like.

"I can't believe you didn't tell me you went there with him," she said. "I thought we told each other everything."

"I thought so too. It just all seemed to happen so fast, and I didn't know how to say it. And I knew--" I cut myself off, but she finished the sentence for me.

"You knew I wouldn't listen."

The tears in her eyes shocked me. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen Larissa sad enough to cry. I felt my own eyes fill yet again.

"I should have been there for you, not calling you names. I drove you to him." She looked down and a tear splashed onto the back of her right hand. Her

ringless right hand.

"You didn't drive me to him. I wanted to go. That part was stupid, you were right. Larissa, where's your ring?"

"Greg and I broke up," she said, not looking up at me.

"Oh, no," I said, totally inadequately.

"Yeah." She raised her head then, her mouth in a twisted smile. "Last week. He was cheating on me."

Shock and outrage shot through me. "Are you sure?"

"I saw him kissing her."

"Why didn't you tell m-- Oh. Right."

"Yeah. I couldn't really tell you when you were..."

"When I was doing the same thing with Kegan," I said, then dropped my head into my hands. "And you must have been even angrier with me."

She grabbed a bit of my hair and pulled gently. I lifted my head and looked at her. "Honestly? I was, at first. But I know you. If you were considering going back to... well, you weren't just going for a fling. You were serious. I ended up more worried about you than anything else."

"I'm okay," I said, and felt the truth of it fill me. I really was. "But what about you?"

"I'll be fine," she said. "It sucks, but I'll survive. I might not, though, if you don't tell me what happened."

We smiled at each other and I went on, explaining how it had built and how we'd become closer and closer until we'd met up at Light. I got stuck then; Larissa and I had never discussed our sex lives in great and gory detail, and I didn't have words for how Kegan's kisses had made me feel. I settled for, "We kissed. A lot. Then we went to his place."

Larissa's eyes widened. "You didn't... did you?"

I shook my head, then busied myself scraping the last remnants of nail polish from my thumb, giving the task my full attention. "I wanted to, though. I can't believe how much I wanted to. It was like I'd gone back in time, like I'd never met Ian."

"Back to when life was easier."

I looked up. "I didn't think it was easy then. Classes and tests and exams and all that."

"It didn't seem easy *then*, no. But compared to now, with jobs and mortgages and credit card bills? I'd go back in a second."

"Okay, let's go back together."

She laughed. I didn't. She calmed herself quickly. "Are you serious?"

"I'm thinking about becoming a designer, which means more school."

"That's awesome. Does Ian know?"

I shook my head. "I only really started thinking about it last week. There's still lots of time."

She took a sip of her drink, eyeing me contemplatively. Setting the glass down, she said, "Will you redecorate my place for free?"

"For you? Double the usual price," I said, and giggled at her look of mock outrage. Joking with Larissa again felt so good I was afraid to go on with the story. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed her.

She must have felt the same way; she tapped her finger on the table and said, "Am I better off not hearing the rest of what happened?"

"Maybe."

We looked at each other for a second, then she said, "I'll risk it. Carry on."

And so I did. I told her how Tasha and I had talked, and about trying to imagine

being with each of the men. I didn't spare her about seeing Kegan after she'd yelled at me; she winced but was relieved to hear that I hadn't caved in and let him kiss me. I described our date the night before, and told her about the little bear he'd given me.

"Does the box have a store address on it? We could take it back."

I thought back but couldn't remember.

"Well, let me know. I'll go with you to return it if you want. Then you could buy something else, maybe something for Ian."

The bear was a work of art, but keeping it after Kegan had given it to me didn't seem right. I didn't know what to do with it.

Finally, I tried to explain how the near car accident that day had made everything so clear to me. I couldn't do it justice, but she seemed to understand.

"I actually had a bit of that after Ian's parents died," she admitted. "Just realizing how short life is, and how you never know what's going to happen."

I nodded. "It's strange, though, because Lou and I were never really at risk. I didn't even take my foot off the brake."

"Sure, but if you had..."

"Yeah," I said, and we sat silent for a moment.

"So, you told Kegan it wasn't happening. What did he say?"

"At the time, nothing."

She raised an eyebrow, and I added, "He called me before you did."

The eyebrow went a little higher. I sighed. "He told me he loves me, and I should call him if I change my mind."

Larissa frowned. "Nothing else?"

I thought back. "No, not really. Why, what were you expecting?"

"I'd have thought he'd have pressured you, tried to get you to go for him."

I shook my head. "He didn't do anything like that. He didn't even kiss me when I told him not to, even though he knew I wanted him to." I sighed again. "He was the perfect gentleman, really."

She didn't look convinced, but let it go. "And now what?"

"Well, I'm still supposed to be working with him, but I think I'm going to get out of it. It'll just be too hard. No idea how I'm going to do that, but I will."

"And then Ian comes back on Saturday."

"Yep, and we just move on."

"Are you going to tell him?"

My cell phone rang, saving me from admitting that I didn't know. I looked at the screen and said, "It's my mom. Do you mind?"

She shook her head and I answered the phone.

"Candice, your dad and I wondered if you might like to come over for dinner tomorrow night. I have something to give you, something for Ian."

"Sure," I said. "What is it?"

She gave that tinkly little laugh that felt like tiny knives scraping their way down my spine. "You'll find out tomorrow."

We ended the call and I rolled my eyes. "She's got something for Ian."

"Dagger? Poisoned apple?"

"Probably, or something worse."

"Well, be sure to tell me what it is. Okay, so, are you going to tell him?"

I gave a huge sigh. "I don't know."

Larissa looked at me, her face still and strangely sad. "I wouldn't tell, Candice. I

wouldn't want to risk it."

"Risk it?"

She finished her drink and lined her cutlery up perfectly on the edge of her plate before she continued. "Risk losing Ian."

A wave of coldness rolled down my spine. "Losing him? What do you mean?"

"You're going to tell him you cheated on him," she said slowly, as if explaining something to a child. "How do you think he's going to react? If I had a marriage as good as yours, I wouldn't risk losing it. I'd keep my mouth shut."

I struggled to find a reply, but Larissa was quicker. "Hell, if I had any marriage at all I'd keep quiet."

I hadn't thought Larissa had any interest in being married. She'd always been wildly enthusiastic about the single life and her freedom. My face must have shown my confusion, because she said, with an odd gruffness in her voice, "I know, I say I don't want to get married. Most of the time I don't, but sometimes... sometimes it's damn hard to be single."

I nodded slowly, unsure of what to say. "I can understand that," I said finally, when the silence had stretched to near agonizing lengths.

Larissa dropped her napkin on the floor, and bent down to retrieve it. When she came back up, her mascara was smudged, as though she'd wiped her eyes while under the table. She drew in a deep breath, and said, "Of course, sometimes it's damn hard to be married, isn't it?"

I fought back tears. "It is. Oh, Larissa, I can't believe I--"

The tears came in earnest this time, and I couldn't hold them back. I ducked my head down to try to hide them from the other patrons.

"You know how I feel about honesty, but there's such a thing as being too honest, and this would be too honest. He doesn't need to know. I think you should never tell anyone else, and we should both forget about it."

I wiped my eyes and nodded. "You... you really think I shouldn't tell him?"

"I do. It's not going to help, and I think it'll just make everything worse."

I wasn't going to tell Ian. I tried again to imagine living the rest of my life with this secret. Imagine myself kissing Ian, going to bed with Ian, loving Ian, without him ever knowing.

Larissa was right. I had to live with this burden myself. I managed to smile at her and she reached out and awkwardly patted my hand.

"It'll be okay, chickie, you'll see."

"Oh, I hope so."

As I picked at my food, I said, "I think you're right that I shouldn't tell Ian. But what happens if he finds out?"

Larissa nodded slowly. "Well, if he finds out, I guess you'd have to tell him the truth, that you didn't tell him because it was a mistake, a one-time mistake, and you didn't want to hurt him by letting him know."

"Do you think he'd be all right with that?"

"Well, I doubt he'd be thrilled, but I do think he'd understand. Ian's an understanding guy, isn't he?"

Oh, yes, he was. Ian was a great guy, way better than I deserved. I wasn't fit to worship the ground he walked on. He was just so much better than I was in every--

"Don't do that."

Startled, I looked up at Larissa. "Do what?"

"Were you thinking about how much better Ian is than you are?"

"Wow. How'd you know that?"

"Because."

"Because how?"

Larissa looked at me speculatively for a moment, and then seemed to come to a decision. "Because I did that when I cheated on Steve."

When she what? "You cheated? I didn't know that."

She smiled. "Of course you didn't, because I take my own advice."

Steve and Larissa had dated four years ago. They'd broken up in a most amiable fashion, both wanting different things, and were still good friends. "But... what happened?"

"It's actually very similar to your situation," Larissa said, waving at our waitress and pointing at our empty martini glasses. Receiving a smile and a thumbs-up in return, she continued. "I was drunk and got hit on at a bar. Before I knew it, we were out back by the dumpster."

"By the dumpster?" I said in disbelief.

"I'm afraid so."

"And you never told Steve?"

"Not a word. It was a mistake, I knew it would never happen again, and there was nothing to be gained, for me or for Steve, by telling him. So I didn't."

"Hmmm," I said, trying to incorporate this into my view of Larissa.

"But after I decided not to tell him, I kept feeling so bad about it that I started acting like a martyr. You know, doing only what he wanted me to do, thinking he was so much better a person than I was... that's what really broke us up. He got fed up with me, and I just couldn't believe I deserved him."

"Wow," I said, smiling at our waitress as she delivered our drinks.

"Yeah, wow."

"Larissa," I said hesitantly, "do you really think it'll be all right? Me and Ian, I mean."

Larissa smiled at me. "Absolutely."

"But..."

"But what?"

I sighed. "But you don't know something."

She raised an eyebrow and waited.

I didn't quite know how to say it. "But... see... Kegan really wanted me."

"No doubt."

"No," I said, frustration growing as I couldn't find the right words. "He doesn't *have* to want me, but he did. I want that."

Larissa stared at me as though I'd sprouted another head. "You want Kegan to want you?"

"No, I want Ian to want me like that."

"Doesn't he?"

"He has to want me."

Apparently I'd grown a fourth head. "He does? Really?"

"Well, yeah, because we're married."

"Oh, because marriages never break up, and people in marriages want each other all the time." She dropped the sarcasm as she went on. "Candice, is that why you went for Kegan?"

I stared at the tablecloth.

"I've seen how Ian looks at you when he doesn't think anyone's looking at him. I was there when you guys got together for the first time, remember? He wants you. *And* he loves you."

"I'm an idiot," I said, still eying the tablecloth. "It was just so *nice* to have him wanting me so much. It made me feel special."

"Maybe you should think about how special having Ian want you is."

I rubbed my eyes. "Do you think we'll be okay?"

"It might not be quite like it was before, but I think it can be better. You chose to stay with him, and you can still trust him to be there for you. And he can trust you."

"I guess so."

She looked quizzical.

"Well, I wasn't very trustworthy this time."

"That was a mistake. Ian wouldn't damn you for a mistake like that. Would you damn *him* for one?"

I shook my head.

"There you go."

We finished our dinner, talking about various inconsequential things. The bill came, and I insisted on paying for Larissa. She refused at first, but gave way when I told her I really wanted to. She's a good friend that way.

As we left, she said, "I'm off to Chapters. Want to come with?"

"You know, I've been there too much lately. I think I'll pass."

Larissa stopped dead and gave a good impression of a woman having a heart attack. "You.... not going to Chapters... the world's gone mad!"

I slapped Larissa lightly on the arm, and she laughed. "Sorry, it's just so unusual."

"I know, I know... would it help if I told you I have about ten new novels at home waiting to be read?"

"I think that would make the world seem more normal, yes."

"Well, then, I have twenty."

"Ahhh, everything's settling into place again."

I laughed, and gave Larissa a huge hug. We're not usually the huggy types, but today seemed to be the right time. She squeezed me tight, whispered in my ear, "It'll be fine," and headed off to Chapters, waving as she went with the hand not clutching her birthday present, which I'd somehow remembered to bring along.

I waved back, then turned and went home. I had a lot of work to do on my house. For my husband. Not because he was better than me. But just because he deserved it.

Wednesday, August 24th

As Lou passed by my desk on the way to the coffee machine, I gathered my courage and said, "Lou?"

He stopped. "What's up? I don't have much time today so you'll have to solve your own problems."

That was what I was trying to do. I didn't exactly feel encouraged, but I went on regardless. "Could I meet with you for a few minutes? Even one minute?"

His eyes flicked to the clock on the wall above the door. "Give me ten minutes and then come on in."

"Thanks," I said as he left my desk.

Ten minutes in which to sit and stew, lovely. The only way I was going to get out of working with Kegan was to throw myself on Lou's mercy.

If he had any.

My phone rang and my heart picked up its pace considerably. I looked at the call display screen: no indication that it would be Kegan. Still, I had to force myself to answer it.

Joy. Not Kegan. An incredibly dull client with some incredibly dull questions about his rather dull restaurant. Exactly what I needed to distract me. Our conversation went on for a little while, during which I saw Lou returning to his

office.

When the questions were finally done, I said goodbye to the dull little man. Hanging up the phone, I felt my heart starting another little dancing session in my chest, but walked as calmly as I could to Lou's office. I knocked, he called out, "Come in," and I did, closing the door behind me.

He folded his hands in front of him on his huge desk and waited. I sat down in his visitor chair and took a deep breath. I'd practiced and practiced this discussion on my way to work, but now my mind was a blank. All of my carefully planned phrases, gone, just like the day I tried to give a speech in my fourth grade class. I stared at him for a panicky second, and then pulled myself together. The prepared speech was gone, but I had to say something.

"Lou, I can't work with Kegan any more."

He raised an eyebrow at this. "Oh, really."

"This is embarrassing, but I have to tell you. I didn't tell you the truth when you first asked me to work with him. I *do* think I have the knowledge and experience to do the client contact. It's just Kegan I can't work with, at least not any more."

Lou's curiosity had been piqued, I could tell. He leaned forward slightly in his chair. "And why is that?"

I took such a deep breath that I felt my ribs creaking, and said, before I could stop myself, "We used to date, and it's difficult for me to work with him."

He pondered this for a second. "You agreed to do it. Why are you backing out now?"

I started to babble some nonsense about having realized that it would be more difficult than I'd expected, but Lou cut me off. "Did you see Kegan on the weekend?"

I stared at him. He must have been able to tell from my shocked face that he'd hit home. He sighed. "He phoned here right after you girls left on Friday. He asked to speak to you, and I told him you'd all gone out dancing."

"How..." I didn't know how to finish the sentence.

"How did I know that you were all going out, and where you were going?"

I nodded. We'd been very careful not to discuss it within Lou's earshot because we knew Richard wasn't keen on us socializing.

He gave me the first real smile I'd had from him in weeks. "Candice, I pay attention. Richard expects me to know what's going on."

I had a brief insane impulse to ask him if he and Richard knew about my tattoo, but fortunately he was continuing to talk. "Did... something happen with you and Kegan on Friday?"

I closed my eyes and said, "Yes."

"So that's the real reason you didn't want to work with him before. Too much tension between you?"

I felt tears at the back of my eyes, fighting to be released, but I blinked hard and nodded. I would not cry.

Lou said, "See, I actually thought you didn't want to be bothered with the client contact."

I said quickly, "Not at all. I'm very interested."

He nodded, looking at me thoughtfully. "Just not with Kegan."

"Right."

He took a sip of his coffee, then said, "All right, then. I'll look for another opportunity for you and I will take over the last meetings for Kegan's restaurant."

I started to thank him, but he talked over me. "Candice, you need to understand something. I considered letting you go over this."

He paused as if waiting for my response, but I didn't have one.

"You really didn't seem interested in being involved and I felt insulted that you assumed I didn't know whether you were ready."

I hung my head as he continued to talk. I'd handled it so badly.

"You certainly don't need to give me all your personal details, but don't lie to me again. You should have told me you have history with Kegan and it would make you too uncomfortable to work with him. I might have still tried to encourage you to do it but I wouldn't have forced you. Do you see what I mean?"

"I do," I said, and then part of my prepared speech came back into my brain. "I really am sorry I let you down, Lou, and I promise it won't happen again."

"Good," Lou said. I got up to leave.

"One more thing, Candice."

I stood awkwardly, not sure whether to sit back down.

"Are you going to tell your husband what happened?"

I sat down. "I don't plan to."

Lou tilted his head slightly to the side and looked at me. "You might want to reconsider that."

I felt outrage beginning to grow in me. Totally not his business. It must have shown in my face, because Lou said calmly, "Of course, it's not any of my concern what you do in your private life. I will say, though, that if Ian finds out on his own, it will be much worse for him, and for you, than if you tell him."

I nodded slowly, not wanting to consider this opposing point of view.

"Give it some more thought. You may end up regretting keeping it a secret."

I took a deep breath and sighed it back out. "I will," I said reluctantly.

Lou smiled. "Okay. Now get out there and get some work done, would you?"

I smiled back and returned to my desk deep in thought. Agonizing annoying thought.

If I could guarantee that Ian would never find out, would it be better not to tell him? But how could I guarantee that? Since there was no way to be sure

someone wouldn't tell him someday, maybe I should do it first. But...

I rubbed my scalp vigorously with both hands, trying to scrub the thoughts out of my brain. Feeling a little calmer, I gathered up some particularly dull projects and research assignments and slammed through them all as quickly as I could. It helped, a little.

I made a promise to myself on the way to my parents' place after work. I would not let her bad-mouth Ian. None of the little snide comments, or the praising something someone else had done that Ian hadn't done, or the raving over Kegan.

Especially not the raving over Kegan. I'd done enough raving myself in relation to that man and I wouldn't let any more of it go on. I owed Ian at least that much.

Over dinner, my mother was sweetness itself. She loved my new hair and makeup. I told her about the changes I'd made to the house and she asked lots of questions and said everything sounded wonderful.

"And how did you get that headboard off the balcony?"

"Threw it over the edge?" suggested my father. "That's what I would have done."

I giggled. "Of course not. I broke it into pieces, actually."

"You did? By yourself?"

I didn't really appreciate her implication, but I did have to admit I wasn't the kind of person to disassemble furniture without a team of helpers to do my bidding and a large supply of chocolate waiting to soothe my nerves afterwards.

At least, I never used to be that kind of person.

"Yep, by myself. I used a crowbar. It was partly rotted anyhow, so it came apart with not too much work."

"That's wonderful, dear. Good for you."

She sounded sincere, and I had high hopes that we would have a good evening.

Which, much to my surprise, we did. Until we were out on the porch drinking our coffee. She smiled at me, a sweet and loving smile, and I was instantly on guard. That particular smile always meant there was something coming that I wouldn't like.

As a child, I got that smile just before I had to go to the dentist. And when she decided I couldn't have a puppy after all. And the time my grade seven teacher told her and my father that I was a social butterfly, and if I spent half the time working that I spent talking to my friends I'd get straight As, and so she decided that I couldn't go to Wonderland for my birthday with my friends like I'd planned.

And, now, apparently, when she was about to start her favorite pastime of Ian bashing. "When exactly will Ian be back, Candice?"

"This Saturday."

"Oh, that should be lovely for you. I'm sure it's been strange not having him around."

More than you know, Mom. "Yes, it has been."

Why, oh why, did I always fall for it when she was nice? Somehow I believed, every single time, that she was going to be kind and caring, even though I should have known it wasn't not going to happen.

A zebra doesn't change its spots, as Larissa was fond of saying.

"I have something for him. Could I give it to you to take home?"

"Of course," I said, not wanting to remind her that she'd mentioned the mysterious something on the phone. "What is it?"

She smiled at me again and went back into the house.

My father turned to me and said in an urgent whisper, "She means well, Candice, she really does."

Oh no. What was coming?

What was coming, as it turned out, was a college catalogue.

A college catalogue for high school dropouts.

I stared at the book, covered with photos of smiling people, and wanted to kill her. First off, Ian was not a high school dropout. And second, even if he had been, it was definitely none of her business what he did with his career. And third, how dare she?

I took a deep breath and dropped the catalogue on the floor.

"Don't forget it, dear," she said, settling back into her chair.

"I'm not going to forget it," I said, standing up. "I will never forget it."

"What do you mean, Candice?" Her voice was innocent. Too innocent.

"This is not okay, Mom. It's not."

"What do you mean? I'm just trying to help."

I sat back down on the edge of my chair. I would not let her do this. Not this time. "You're not trying to help. You're trying to convince me that I should be with somebody better, that Ian's not good enough for me. And it's not happening any more."

Over her shocked protests, I continued. "I love Ian. I know you don't like him, and I've let you get away with saying rotten things about him for way too long. But he's a good guy, and he doesn't deserve it."

"I haven't said anything mean about him, honey. What on earth are you talking about?"

"Mom, please. How can you say that?"

She was looking angry now, and I cringed inside. I hated causing trouble, and even though she drove me crazy, I loved my mother and I knew I was going to hurt her. But I had to start standing up for Ian. He deserved it.

"Name one mean thing I've said." Her tone was challenging.

My father turned toward me, no doubt to stop me, but I kept my eyes on my mother. "You may not have said anything flat-out mean, but everything you say about Ian is mean underneath. You're always making cracks about him."

"I am not, Candice, I have no idea what you're talking about. I just want to make sure that you're really happy with Ian, that you see him for who he really is."

"I do, Mom. I see a man who loves me, who takes care of me when I'm sick and takes me out for fun when I'm bored and buys me ice cream when I feel sad. He's the best man I've ever met and I love him and... and..."

I was crying now. I'd wanted so badly to stay calm and controlled, but it was just so hard to stand up to her. My father dragged his chair over next to mine and put his hand on my shoulder. He squeezed gently, and I felt a little bit stronger.

I took a deep breath. "Mom, I need you to respect Ian. It's really important to me. You can't make comments about how he's not well enough educated, or how he's just helping out in his work, or anything like that. If you do..."

She was staring at me in shock as it was, but I had to go to the end of it.

"If you do, I won't be able to see you any more."

"Candice!"

"I mean it, Mom. The next time you make comments about Ian, I will have to leave."

My mother burst into tears. I sat silently, not sure what to do. I felt horrible about making her so upset.

"I can't believe you'd talk to me like that. I'm your mother, Candice. I deserve better than this."

Suddenly, I didn't feel quite so horrible.

"This is not about you," I said, surprising myself with how calmly and clearly the words came out. "It is about Ian. My husband. The man I love. The man I will stay with forever. He deserves your respect. And I am going to make sure he gets it from now on."

Still sobbing, my mother got up and fled into the house.

I looked over at my father, almost afraid to meet his eyes. If he was angry at me, I didn't know what I'd do.

He looked saddened, but he was smiling at me. "Good for you, kiddo."

Stunned, I couldn't think of anything to say. The tears welled up again, and I rubbed my eyes roughly.

"It had to be done," he said comfortingly. "I've actually been hoping you'd do that for a while."

"Really?" I said, snuffling a little.

"Yup. I've been wondering too whether Ian was right for you--"

I cut him off. "Not you too! Ian's a good person, and--"

In his turn, he cut me off. "I don't mean that at all. Because you weren't defending him I was starting to wonder whether you really wanted to be with him. I'm so glad to see you standing up for the guy."

"Dad," I said, afraid of the answer. "Do you like Ian?"

He smiled at me. "Candice, I like him a lot. But it really doesn't matter anyhow. What matters is that you love him, that you're happy with him, that you think he's good enough."

The tears welled up again.

"I do."

On the way home, I thought long and hard. I'd meant every word of what I'd said to my mother. Ian *was* a good man, and he *did* deserve to be treated with respect. But was I practicing what I was preaching? Lou's words swept through my mind again, and I wondered. Was I doing the right thing by not telling Ian?

If he didn't know about Kegan, I wouldn't have to face the consequences of what

I'd done. But was that right? Or, like Larissa had said, would I just be dumping my problem off on Ian if I told him?

I loved Ian and I didn't want to hurt him by telling him. At the same time, I loved him enough to not want to hide things from him.

Back and forth, back and forth.

When I got home, I fed Ninja and settled down at the computer to email Ian. I took a deep breath and just started typing.

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacatocks@hotmail.com

Subject: I have something to tell you.

Dear Ian,

I don't know how to tell you this, so I'll just say it.

When I had that physical a few weeks before you left, I told you everything was fine. Well, it wasn't. When the doctor called, she said my Pap test came back weird, and she did another test to find out if it was cancer. I didn't tell you because you were busy getting ready to go and I didn't want to upset you.

She called while I was at Kegan's restaurant to say it's not cancer and I'm fine, and I got pretty emotional. Kegan helped me stop crying, and since then we've been spending a lot of time together, outside of work.

It was all just friendly at first but it started to change. On Friday night, I ran into him while I was out with the girls from work at Light. We ended up kissing. Then he told me he wants me back.

I hate to say it, but I thought about it. But I decided I want to be with you. And I do. Forever. I won't be seeing him at all any more. Not for work, not for anything. Ever. I already told Lou I couldn't see Kegan any more and he's going to take care of whatever meetings are left.

I'm so sorry. I just thought you should know before you came home, if you still

want to come home to me. I feel so terrible.

I love you so much. I never meant for this to happen.

Candice

I stared at the email for a long time, trying to decide what to do. Finally, I decided that I would want to know if Ian had been involved with someone else, so I had to tell him. I loved Ian and he deserved to know everything about me, and this had to be told. Much as I didn't want to, it had to be told.

A little voice in my head said, "What if Ian leaves you over it?" I felt sick, but I answered it. *Then he does. But I still have to tell him.*

I sent the email.

Then I went to bed and cried myself to sleep.

Thursday, August 25th

I couldn't believe I'd told him. How was he going to react? Would he be furious? Hurt? Would he leave me? I worked without stopping, scared to even take a break in case the emotions overwhelmed me. I felt like I was standing behind myself, watching me go through my day, an observer instead of an actor. I'd sent the email from home, so I had no way to know whether Ian had responded.

I had nothing to do but work.

And wait.

And second-guess myself.

Why had I told him? Why hadn't I gone with Larissa's suggestion, seeming more intelligent all the time, and just let it all pass by? Ian wouldn't have found out, and there wouldn't have been any issues at all. Now, there had to be an issue, and I'd caused it. Me and my stupid email.

And that was another thing. What had possessed me to tell him over email? He'd open that email, expecting a nice friendly little note from his wife, and find out

that I'd considered leaving him for Kegan. How lovely.

But would a phone call have been better? At least with an email, he would have a chance to think it through before he responded. If I'd called him, or told him in person, he would have had to answer me right then and there, and I'd have gotten his immediate feelings, and I couldn't imagine having to hear his reaction.

But still, an email?

I ran around and around this dead-end track for the whole day. It was amazing watching myself get work done while obsessing constantly about Ian and his reaction. I worked straight through lunch, taking only a few minutes to grab a sandwich. Working kept me as close to sane as I was likely to get.

Finally, five o'clock and the end of the work day rolled around, and I rushed home, straight to my computer, nearly stomping on Ninja when he meandered into my path howling for his dinner. I checked my email with a trembling mouse. Looking down, I realized that the mouse was fine; it was my hand that was shaking.

To: ninjacatrocks@hotmail.com

From: ianw@buildaid.com

Subject: Re: I have something to tell you.

That makes two of us. We'll talk when I get home.

Ian

I sat, staring at those curt lines, for nearly five minutes. What did he mean? I'd ended my email by saying, "I never meant for this to happen." Was he talking about that? It had to be that. There wasn't any other explanation. Unless... had he... had something happened?

No, no way, I told myself. Ian wouldn't do something like that.

Would he?

I felt sick and furious and scared all at once, and I knew one thing for sure: there

was no way I could wait until he came home to find out.

It was an eleven hour time difference to Bangladesh. With a little thought, I figured out that when it was eight o'clock at night for me, it would be nine in the morning for Ian.

I sat on the couch, Ninja beside me, and watched the clock. When it hit seven o'clock, I grabbed the phone. It took three tries to get a connection to the camp, and then the guy who answered the phone took forever to get Ian. I did my best to stay calm. I was sure Ian wouldn't mind being woken up at eight for this.

Which might well have been true. But he certainly did mind being woken up at six. Mental math is so not my strong point.

In a groggy voice, he asked me what was wrong. I started to explain that I hadn't understood his email and I wanted to know what was going on, but he cut me off. "Look, this'll cost us a fortune. I'll instant message you, and we can write back and forth to get this resolved."

"I thought you couldn't stay on long."

"At this time of day, nobody else wants the computer. Okay?"

After I agreed, he hung up without telling me he loved me, which scared me even more. I started my messaging program and waited for him to connect, too nervous to check my email or do anything else but wait. And wait. After about five minutes...

TheHammer: Hi.

NinjaCatRocks: Hi back.

TheHammer: I have to know about this cancer thing first. You sure you're okay?

NinjaCatRocks: Yeah. Need to go back in six months but she's positive I'm fine.

As I was typing, he sent another one.

TheHammer: I can't believe you didn't tell me.

NinjaCatRocks: I told you why I didn't. Look, I really need to know what you meant by that 'makes two of us' comment. We can talk about the other stuff later. Tell me. Please.

I waited for several minutes for his response to this, and was starting to think he'd been disconnected when...

TheHammer: Candice, I kissed a woman here. Kind of similar to your situation, actually. We were talking, and...

My stomach felt like a load of concrete had dropped into it from a great height. I left the computer and found my favorite fuzzy blanket, then wrapped myself up against the feelings and returned. Ian had written again.

TheHammer: It just happened somehow, and I've been feeling absolutely terrible about it. I couldn't decide whether or not to tell you. So, yeah, I kind of know how you feel.

I shuffled the blanket around until I could get my fingers to the keyboard. I didn't know what I was going to say, so I just started typing.

NinjaCatRocks: Who is she? What does she look like? When was this? Are you still seeing her?

I sent off the message, not knowing how to ask what I really wanted to know: Are you going to leave me? Do you still love me? What's happening to us?

TheHammer: She's the doctor here. Her name's Jessica. I do still see her at work, but we talked about it the next day and agreed that it was a mistake and it won't happen again. And it hasn't. And won't.

NinjaCatRocks: You didn't answer all my questions.

TheHammer: I'm not telling you what she looks like.

NinjaCatRocks: Why not? You know what Kegan looks like. You've seen pictures.

TheHammer: Yeah, and I've done nothing but imagine you with him since you told me. Trust me, you're better off not knowing anything about her.

I closed my eyes against the pain. What had I done? What had we done?

NinjaCatRocks: Don't think about him any more. It was so stupid. I'm so sorry.

TheHammer: Me too.

There was a long pause. I cried, and waited for Ian to send another message. When he hadn't sent one after a few long moments, I did.

NinjaCatRocks: You didn't tell me. When was it?

TheHammer: Does it matter?

NinjaCatRocks: It does to me.

Had he done it because of what I'd done with Kegan, or--

TheHammer: The first week here. The Thursday night.

I pushed my chair back away from the computer as if it were trying to bite me. The first *week*?

TheHammer: A bunch of us were talking, and the subject of families came up. Someone asked about my parents and I told about the accident. Jessica said if she'd been me, she'd have blamed you for it.

How lovely of her. Another message appeared almost immediately.

TheHammer: Everyone else was horrified, but she said she'd have known it wasn't your fault but it would be natural to feel angry and upset. I stood up and said I'd never felt that way and took off. She came out after me and...

NinjaCatRocks: And WHAT??? You keep trailing off at the end. What did you do?

TheHammer: I really don't want to tell you.

NinjaCatRocks: Did you sleep with her?

It was the longest pause yet. I sat, staring at the screen, barely breathing. What would I do if he said he had? I'd thought I'd been jealous when Kegan had talked

about other women, but I hadn't felt anything like this, like I was being ripped into bleeding shards.

At last, his message appeared. I couldn't bring myself to read it right away, but eventually my need to know overwhelmed my terror.

TheHammer: No. I promise you, no. We went out where there was nobody around and we were arguing about it and then I admitted that I had felt that way and I hated myself for it, and she hugged me and said I shouldn't, and then somehow we were kissing.

Somehow.

A rage like nothing I'd felt before was rising in me. I wanted to kill this Jessica with my bare hands and then do some serious damage to Ian too. Not even a week in, and he was throwing himself on some girl. Even though I didn't know what she looked like, I could see him wrapped around her, his hands on her, his mouth...

NinjaCatRocks: And then what?

TheHammer: It went on for a while, I guess. After, she just hugged me again and went inside and I sat outside thinking for ages. We talked the next day, like I said, and we're friends now.

Friends with benefits?

I thought back to the first phone call, which would have been after this little incident, and realized something.

NinjaCatRocks: She was there, wasn't she, the first time you phoned me?

A long pause, and then...

TheHammer: Yeah. Made me feel weird. After I got off the phone, she took me outside again and said if I couldn't tell you I loved you, maybe I didn't. I told her I did, and as I said it I realized how much I did. Do. She didn't believe me and tried to kiss me again, but I wouldn't. Not when I know for sure how much I want to be with you.

My fury spilled over and I couldn't hold back.

NinjaCatRocks: Well, gee, honey, thanks so much for thinking of me. Sorry you didn't get even more fun.

TheHammer: Um, hello, I'm not the only one. Nice job on picking back up where you left off with Kegan. Have you been dreaming about him the whole time we've been married?

NinjaCatRocks: Maybe I should have been. At least he never cheated on me. Mom always preferred him, maybe she was

I snapped my fingers off the keyboard and balled my hands into fists, pressing them to my mouth. Reaching out again, I carefully deleted the entire message before I could accidentally send it. This wasn't remotely productive. Yelling at each other wasn't going to solve anything.

NinjaCatRocks: I never wanted to see him again. When he showed up at work, I was stunned. I swear, I haven't talked to him once while we were together until now. Ian, I love you.

I waited, my hands trembling.

TheHammer: Candice, I love you.

The tears welled up in my eyes again and I reached for the keyboard, but he wrote again right away.

TheHammer: What are we going to do?

NinjaCatRocks: I don't know. Do you still want to be with me?

TheHammer: ABSOLUTELY. Do you?

NinjaCatRocks: ABSOLUTELY. Do you think it'll work?

TheHammer: I hope so.

NinjaCatRocks: How did this HAPPEN?

TheHammer: I don't know. I guess we've had a rough year.

NinjaCatRocks: That's the reason??

TheHammer: No, but... I swear I didn't feel like this at home, but now... don't you feel a bit like we do the same thing day in and day out? There's not a lot of variety.

NinjaCatRocks: Variety? Like, handcuffs and stuff?

TheHammer: Wow, dirty girl! Where did that come from? No, I totally didn't mean that. (although... :)

My rage flashed again at his response. I hadn't been trying to be dirty, I really hadn't understood what he was suggesting. Did he have to make a joke right now?

I took a deep breath. At least he was joking about me, not about *her*. I decided to ignore his comment and move on.

NinjaCatRocks: *blush* Okay, tell me quick now that I feel like an idiot.

TheHammer: We go to the same restaurants, eat the same food, watch the same TV shows, watch way too much TV... we don't do anything exciting. Jessica, well, she's new. I don't know what she does when she's not here, and that's kind of exciting. You know?

I thought of Kegan and his jazz CDs and scuba diving lessons. I wondered what Ian would think of my tattoo.

NinjaCatRocks: I do know. But how do we fix that?

TheHammer: I don't know. I guess just make sure we don't fall back into the same old rut when I get home?

But would that be enough?

NinjaCatRocks: I guess. Do you WANT to come home?

TheHammer: Definitely. I've really missed you. I know this is horrible, but it really didn't mean anything to me. It just happened.

NinjaCatRocks: I guess I can see that. I know I don't have the right to be upset, but I still am, somehow.

TheHammer: Of course you do. I was so mad when I read your email I punched a hole in the wall. (I still have to fix that before I leave.) Do you want me to come home?

He punched a hole in a wall? Because of me?

NinjaCatRocks: I do. Do you think we'll be okay?

TheHammer: God, I hope so.

I stared at the message. He sounded about as confident as I felt.

NinjaCatRocks: Me too.

TheHammer: Don't tell your mother, okay?

NinjaCatRocks: Did you sunburn your BRAIN? Of course I won't.

TheHammer: I should get going. I need to take a shower before work.

So he'd be nice and clean for Jessica. The anger filled me again, but just for a second. This was how it was going to be. I had to trust him.

TheHammer: Were you thinking it was so I'd look good for Jessica?

NinjaCatRocks: Um, kinda.

TheHammer: We're meeting with some charity officials today to show them around.

NinjaCatRocks: Oh.

TheHammer: We have to trust each other, or this is never going to work. Like, see how I'm not asking if you're seeing Kegan? (Of course, if you want to tell me, go ahead.)

NinjaCatRocks: I asked Lou to do the rest of the meetings. Talk about awkward - I had to tell him why - but he's going to do it. So no, I won't.

TheHammer: What if he wants to?

NinjaCatRocks: He knows it's not going to happen. I don't think he will. And even if he does, *I* won't.

TheHammer: I hate that he knew about the cancer stuff and I didn't. I should have been there for you.

Yes, he should have been. And...

NinjaCatRocks: I should have LET you be there. I wished I had, a million times. I'm so sorry. Do you think we can get through this? Really?

Another long pause.

TheHammer: All I know is, I love you. I hope it's enough.

NinjaCatRocks: Me too. And I love you too.

TheHammer: I really do have to go, Candice. I'll email later. I love you.

And he was gone.

I shut down the computer and curled up on the couch, staring into space. Ninja climbed up beside me and started to purr, and I stroked him with one hand, hardly noticing what I was doing.

Four days. I'd been doing everything I could to stay professional with Kegan, and playing with the yarn Ian'd left, and thinking about Ian, and four days after he left he was kissing another woman. I felt sick.

I knew it was hypocritical, but I couldn't help it. I'd done the same thing, but somehow it just seemed to be worse the way he'd done it. All those emails, and never a hint that anything had happened.

Was there more that he hadn't told me? Why had he needed her to make everything clear to him? How far had it really gone? What were those kisses like? What did she look like? I wanted to know even though he'd said I didn't. Was she a better kisser than me? Would he be dreaming of her when he slept in our bed, thinking of her when we...

For that matter, would I be dreaming of Kegan?

I pulled Ninja onto my lap as the tears started to fall, wrapped my arms around his soft warm body and cried for a long time. By the end, I was lying on my side with Ninja tucked up against me. We fell asleep that way.

Friday, August 26th

I woke up stiff and sore from being crunched into the back of the couch by my space-stealing cat, my eyes sticky and tired. Not a great start to the day. I dragged myself upstairs to take a shower and then decided I'd do something even better.

I put on my gym clothes and headed out for a workout.

I hadn't used the weight machines at the gym since I'd backed off on the daily visits, but I put myself through two rounds of the circuit. Pushing and pulling the weights was strangely cathartic, even though a couple of little old ladies were following right behind me, increasing the weight before they used the machine I'd just vacated.

After the circuits, I climbed onto the elliptical machine and pounded out a solid twenty minutes, then walked on the treadmill for another twenty. I even broke into a jog a few times for a minute or so each time.

Finished, I felt much better. I'd managed not to think about the whole mess during my workout and my brain had cleared. My body was pleasantly tired now, instead of the sickening exhaustion I'd felt when I first woke up, and surviving the day began to seem like a possibility.

In the shower, I remembered it was my mother's birthday, but put it out of my head again. I would call her after work. I couldn't face it now.

As I walked from the subway station, I sent a message to Larissa to see if she might be able to have dinner with me. I didn't tell her why; there was no way I was explaining what Ian had done in a text message.

She called me back a minute later.

"Yeah, dinner sounds good. What's up?"

"Nothing. I'll tell you tonight."

Silence, then, "You didn't see Kegan, did you?"

"No. I told Ian."

"You told-- oh. How'd he take it?"

I sighed. "What time do you want to meet?"

"Ah. Seven?"

Lou'd been strange all day, distant and quiet, and we were wondering what was going on. He'd been in and out of Richard's office, and didn't seem to want to talk to anyone.

We held furtive little conferences when we passed in the hall, and the rumors grew over the course of the day, as rumors do.

"I heard he quit."

"But then wouldn't he be thrilled instead of all weird?"

"Maybe he *is* thrilled, but he's trying to hide it."

"Maybe Richard fired him?"

"But he'd be gone already, wouldn't he?"

"Maybe he's sick."

But the rumor that really took hold was the idea that he was having some kind of embarrassing surgery soon and was feeling nervous about it. The staff tossed around a great many ideas, most far too revolting to repeat, and finally decided he was probably having his 'throbbing manhood' enlarged.

This led to a heated debate, frequently cut off as Lou walked through the office (although 'cut off' might not be the best choice of words in this context) about

whether length or width was more important. As always, the few men in the office sided with length and the women were all about the width.

I would ordinarily have been an active participant in this discussion but working was distracting me from imagining Ian and Jessica, so I kept my head down and worked hard, unlike Allyson who spent the entire day trying to get the guys to explain what good length would do anyone. For the record, 'bragging rights' was the only answer.

Since I had managed to accomplish a few things, I was surprised when Lou called me into his office at just a few minutes before five. Surely I didn't deserve a lecture.

He closed his office door behind me and waved me to a chair. I sat down, he settled himself behind his huge desk as I wondered whether executives have big desks to compensate for lack south of the belt, and we sat in silence for a moment.

I was just starting to wonder whether I had accidentally asked for a meeting when he spoke. "Tell me, how do you think you did on Kegan's restaurant?"

I blinked. "Very well. I put in the extra time to search all three government databases instead of just the usual one, I contacted the past site owner to see if he had any suggestions about dealing with the loud neighbors, and I had the research done a day early. I think he was happy with how our meetings went." A blush rose at the thought of our later meetings, but I carried on through it. "Why?"

Lou leaned back in his chair and eyed me thoughtfully. "What are your career goals, Candice?"

Not sure where he was going, I said, "I like working for you, and I think I'm doing a good job, but I do think about becoming a designer myself. At the same time, I think I make a good assistant. So I really don't have my goals nailed down."

He nodded. "We should get them nailed down."

We?

"I think you're a great assistant, but I also think you could do a lot more. Your work with Kegan really was excellent, especially considering... well, considering the personal issues. I was impressed before, but..."

Lou pushed a sheet of paper across the desk toward me, saying, "Kegan faxed this to me today." I picked it up and skimmed through it, my eyes widening as I read. By the end, I was fighting to keep a grin from my face and tears from my eyes at the same time.

"You can keep that," he said as I tried to hand back the paper. "I made a copy. Several, actually. One's in your file and I gave one to Richard."

I stared at him, speechless.

"Richard insists that you not be held back any longer," Lou said. "I didn't think I was holding you back--"

"You weren't," I jumped in.

He smiled and went on. "At any rate, you can't be a full designer right now since you're not certified. However, Richard wants me to have you do all the designs for the next restaurant. I'll sign off on them, and give you whatever help you need, but we want to see what you can do. If it all works out, Richard is willing to help with the cost of getting you trained."

Was this what I wanted? I paused for a split second to look inside myself, and the warm glow told me it was. "Thank you, Lou. I promise I'll do a great job."

He grinned. "You always do. Let's just hope the client's not an ex-husband or something."

I laughed. "You're safe on that score." Then a thought struck me. "Lou, if Kegan hadn't written that letter, would you and Richard still have done this?"

"Probably not today," he said. "Kegan's endorsement got Richard stirred up. But yes, it would have happened. Richard and I review staff in December or January, and I would have suggested it then."

I smiled. I didn't want it to be just because of Kegan.

Lou smiled back. "Good enough," he said, standing and holding out his hand for me to shake. "Well, my new assistant designer, shall we go announce your promotion?"

Oh, yes, please.

Ordinarily after a promotion is announced, the newly promoted one takes everyone out for drinks. I promised to do it on Monday; I had to talk to Larissa, now more than ever.

Once we were settled at a table, she said, "Okay, so how'd it go?"

"I have other news."

She shook her head. "Tell me about Ian first."

"No, I want to tell you about my promotion first."

Her eyes lit up. "Congrats! Promotion to what?"

"Assistant designer. I design the next restaurant, and Lou watches what I do. If I do it right, they'll actually get me trained. Well, help pay for it, but still. And then I have a career!"

We grinned at each other, and she said, "What made them decide to do it right now? Not that you don't deserve it, but..."

I pulled the paper Lou had given me from my purse and passed it to her. She read it in silence, her brow furrowing as she went. When she reached the bottom, her eyes flicked immediately back to the top of the page. After the second read, she handed it to me. "Did you ask him to do that?"

"Oh, yeah, right. 'Kegan, I'm staying with my husband. Could you write me a nice letter of recommendation?'"

"That's not a nice letter. 'She did a good job' is a nice letter. Saying he's never worked with someone as dedicated as you are? All the stuff about your eye for color and artwork?" She took the letter out of my hand. "Not to mention, 'I am confident that Steel will be a success in large part due to the excellent work of

Candice Warburton'."

She dropped the letter on the table and shook her head. "I would never have expected him to do something like this. There's nothing for him to gain."

"I think that's why he did it," I said. She looked at me, and I blinked several times to hold back the tears. "He said he'd do anything to help me with my career. I guess he thought this would be a good way."

Larissa propped her elbow on the table and rested her chin in her hand, her fingers over her mouth. "I don't know what to say. I really didn't believe he was sincere, but... God, you think you know somebody, what they're like, and then he goes and does something like this."

I squeezed my eyes shut. She could be talking about Ian.

"What else did he do?"

"Not him. Ian."

I opened my eyes as our waitress arrived with our drinks. Larissa thanked her quickly and turned her attention back to me.

"Was he mad when you told him?"

Should I tell her? Was it better for me to keep it all to myself, not let her know what Ian had done? I took a sip of my drink to give myself a little time to think. I'd planned to tell her but now I wasn't so sure.

I looked at her, at her concerned face, and decided to tell her. I wouldn't tell anyone else, but it would be good to have someone else know. I wouldn't have to carry it all by myself.

"I don't even know how to tell you this. He was messing around with some girl there."

She stared at me. "I can_not_ have heard that right."

I sighed. "You heard it. It was apparently just once. Of course, I don't know that."

"Define 'messaging'."

"He didn't want to give me much detail, but definitely kissing, and for a while from the sound of it."

Her eyes widened even further. "He didn't... didn't... I can't even say it, but he didn't, did he?"

"He says not. They were all talking about parents and stuff, and his parents' accident came up, and..." I turned my hands palms up helplessly, and told her about the rest of our instant messaging conversation.

When I finished, she shook her head in amazement. "I'm stunned."

"You and me both." A fresh surge of anger filled me. "I just feel so *stupid*."

"Why stupid?" Her tone was strange, almost cautious, but I was too upset to worry about it.

"I was agonizing over whether or not to tell him about Kegan and he wasn't going to tell me at all. If I hadn't told him, he would have kept it from me forever. And I just can't believe how fast it happened. He wasn't even there a week."

Our dinners arrived and Larissa said to me, "Another drink?"

"What do you think?"

She smiled and ordered us each a refill. When the waitress had left, Larissa said, "This'll probably come out wrong, but I'm so glad that's your reason for feeling stupid."

I frowned. "I don't know if it came out wrong or not, because I don't get it."

"As soon as you said what Ian had done, I was afraid you'd be regretting picking him over Kegan."

I leaned back in my chair and shook my head slowly. A smile began to grow on my face as I said, "You know, that never occurred to me. I was mad at Ian, and hurt, and ready to claw her eyes out, but I never once thought I should have

picked Kegan instead." I still didn't. I knew I loved Ian and wanted to be with him. Whether it would work out... that, I didn't know.

Larissa wiped imaginary sweat from her forehead. "I'm so glad."

My smile faded. "Me too, but it might not matter anyhow."

"Why? You picked Ian, he knows it--"

"Yeah, and we both know what we did. At least, we know some of it. I was one kiss away from falling in love with Kegan again, and I have no idea how close he was to sleeping with that... that *Jessica*, but I know it was too close. How can we get over that? How are we going to trust each other?"

I dropped my face into my hands, then peered at her through my fingers. "What's the point of picking Ian if our marriage is over?"

"Do you think it's over?"

"I have no idea how he feels. He *says* he still wants me, but..." I shrugged.

"How do you feel? Do you still want him? Still want to be married to him?"

"I do," I said instantly, then paused and gave it a bit of thought before going on. "You know, I really do. It hurts that he let that happen with Jessica, but I do believe him that he stopped it."

"Do you know how he felt when you told him about everything?"

"I didn't tell you? He punched a hole in a wall."

Larissa dropped her fork with a clatter. "He did? Ian, the guy I've never even seen annoyed, punched a hole in a *wall*?"

I nodded. "I can't believe it either."

"You'll be fine."

She sounded so definite that I felt my fear lessen just a little. "What makes you so sure?"

"If he'd said, 'Oh, well, whatever', or you had, then I'd be more worried. The passion's obviously still there, since you both care so much. It'll probably take a while to get back to normal, but it'll be okay."

I took a sip of my drink so I wouldn't cry, then said, "I hope so." Staring into the glass, I said, "What if it's *not* there? Not like it was with Kegan, I mean. I don't want to be thinking about him when I'm with Ian."

I looked up, and despite my concern had to laugh at the look on her face.
"What?"

"Don't make me imagine you with Ian, please. I don't need the visual. I'll never be able to look at Ian again, or you for that matter." She rubbed her temples as if trying to massage the thought from her mind.

"What freaky things do you think we do?"

She pointed an accusing finger at me. "Stop it right now, or I'll never have sex again and it'll be all your fault."

"Doesn't hurt me," I said, shrugging. "As long as *I* get to have--"

"I'm warning you." She picked up her drink and pretended to be ready to throw it at me.

"Okay, fine, don't visualize it. It'll just make you jealous anyhow." Ignoring her pretended drink tossing, I added, "But I *am* worried. What if things aren't the same?"

She set down her drink, apparently realizing I was truly upset. "They were good before, right?"

"Before Christmas, yes."

"Christmas?" She looked confused for a second, then her face cleared. "Since his parents."

I nodded. "I think that's why it was so intense with Kegan. No baggage."

"But also no shared history," she said, then gave me a 'hold on' gesture as I

started to protest. "I know you have history with Kegan, but with Ian it's adult history. You guys bought that car together, found your house, even got Ninja together... and yes, you went through his parents' deaths together. Not everything's fun, but it makes your relationship more real."

"I guess." I swirled my fork through the pasta sauce on my plate.

"You didn't want Kegan to go out with Fiona, did you," she said. It wasn't a question.

I shook my head.

"How does that compare to how you feel about Ian and Jessica?"

Our eyes met, and I searched for the right words. "Like the difference between an ice cube and the Arctic."

"And you're afraid the passion's not there. Doofus."

"Don't call me a doofus, you doofus."

"Hey, if the name fits..."

"Did I say I'd charge you twice the usual price for your redecorating? I meant three times as much."

"Rip off!"

"Cheapskate."

"Six of one, two dozen of the other," she said, laughing. I folded my arms and glared in mock fury. She glared back, then grinned.

"You guys'll be fine, chickie."

I grinned back, but I still wasn't sure. We'd done some pretty serious damage to our marriage in the short time Ian had been away; could we really recover?

"Hey, you said you told Tasha about all this, right?" I nodded, and she went on. "Does she know what you decided?"

I shook my head.

"Call her. I have an early shoot tomorrow morning, but if she's around we could have a couple of drinks."

I pulled out my cell, and in minutes Tasha had agreed to meet us. As I put away the phone, I said, "I'm not going to tell her about what Ian did, okay?"

"Makes sense. The fewer people who know, the better."

"That's what I thought." I paused for a second. "I'm glad I told you, though."

"So am I. I missed you, you know."

"Ditto. Oh, and I really am sorry about Greg."

She shrugged. "Plenty more fish in the tank."

"Sea."

"See what?"

I looked at her and burst into laughter. We laughed like fools for several minutes, and the tears were pouring down my face when we finally stopped. Good tears this time.

Wiping her eyes, Larissa said, "Want a reading before Tasha gets here?"

"Sure."

She pulled the tarot cards from her purse. I gave her a little half-smile and she raised an eyebrow at me.

"I was just thinking. It's only been a few weeks since you last did this, but a lot's happened."

"Much water under the dam," she agreed.

Dam? Oh, never mind. I shook my head and waved my hand at the cards. "Read on, my lady."

And so she did.

"Think of a question that you want to have answered, and then pick out four cards, while you're thinking of the question. The first card will be the future, and the other three will tell us more about your question."

There was only one question I wanted answered. I pictured Ian and chose four cards, holding them in my hand as Larissa put the rest of the cards away.

Larissa took the first one from me and turned it face up on the table. It showed a naked woman wrapped in a sash holding what looked like double-ended candlesticks. The corners of the card had a golden-haired man, an eagle, a lion and a bull. It had the words 'The World' printed at the bottom edge.

"This is 'The World'," she said rather unnecessarily. "It means that you are in a position to get your heart's desire but that you have to bring two or more parts together in order to get what you want. You will be happy and connected."

I felt warm and fuzzy inside. "I assume you know what my question was?"

"I have a pretty good idea," she said, scooping the other three cards out of my hand and laying them out face up on the table.

"You have the Nine of Cups, the Ten of Cups, and Temperance. The two Cup cards also talk about getting your heart's desire and about achieving happiness. Temperance is about balance and synthesis, and about being healthy in all areas of life."

"So, summary please," I said. I could have summarized them myself, but I really wanted to hear it from Larissa.

"You're going to be just fine," she said, dazzling me with a big goofy grin. I grinned back and started to feel tears welling up behind my eyes. I blinked hard, still smiling.

"Okay, Miss Candy, no waterworks," she said, ignoring my outraged reaction to the 'no Candice' thing. "We need more drinks!"

When I got home, weak from laughing with my friends, I finally did what I'd

been putting off all day and called my mother.

"Happy birthday," I said, trying to sound cheery and unconcerned.

"Thank you." The icicles dripping from her words would have chilled a polar bear.

"I love you, Mom."

After a painful pause, she said, "Do you?"

"Of course," I said, doing everything I could to put my feelings for her into my voice. "I love Ian too, though. He's a good guy, Mom. I wish you could see that."

She sighed. "So do I, Candice. Tell me the truth. Are you really happy with him?"

As the tears rose in my eyes, I gave her the answer I hoped would be true. "I couldn't be happier."

"That's all I want, for you to be happy. I just didn't think Ian was the right one."

I took a deep breath and said, as gently as I could, "Isn't that up to me to decide?"

"I guess it is," she said, after a moment. "Yes, I guess it is. What time does Ian come home tomorrow?"

"In the afternoon. The flight comes in at one."

"Do you... do you think he might be up for coming over for dinner on Sunday?"

It was my turn to pause as I fought back the tears. "I think he'd be thrilled. So would I."

"Did I say I was inviting you?"

"Mom!" I faked indignation but was delighted at the mere idea that she'd see Ian without me.

"Oh, fine, Candice, you can come too. See you Sunday evening. Tell Ian..."

When she hadn't finished her thought in a few seconds, I said, "Tell him what?"

"Tell him... tell him I hope he has a good flight."

To: ianw@buildaid.com

From: ninjacat rocks@hotmail.com

Subject: how're you feeling?

I feel weird. How do you feel?

My mother and I had it out a few days ago about you. I told her she had to be nice to you. She's invited us over for dinner on Sunday. She invited you first. Can you believe it? And she says she hopes you have a good flight. So do I.

I got great news at work today, but I'll save it to tell you once you're here.

I love you.

C

Saturday, August 27th

I woke up, snapping awake as though an alarm clock had gone off, at four in the morning. The house was utterly silent. What had woken me up? Then it hit me. Ian was coming home today.

I pulled the blanket up more tightly under my chin and stared into the stucco of the ceiling. It was going to be so strange having Ian home, and I just wasn't sure I was ready.

So much had happened while he'd been away, and I was nervous about seeing him. I did still love him, I knew that. In some weird way, I actually loved him more, because I'd decided to stay with him over Kegan. But the fact remained that we'd both taken a pretty big step sideways during our time apart.

When we met again, would we be able to take the same path?

Ninja wandered in just then, distracting me. He scrambled up onto the bed and

snuggled into my hip, purring loudly. I stroked his silky head.

"Enjoy it, bud," I mumbled. "When your daddy comes home, you're back in the basement overnight."

Ninja made a sound rather frighteningly reminiscent of a grunt of disgust, and we drifted off to sleep together.

I got up at eight and took myself to the gym for a nice easy workout. After, I gave the house a thorough cleaning. Once the place looked less like an evil demon had swept through it ("All fear Detritus, devil of dirt and clutter!") I took a shower and got dressed.

A sudden wailing burst forth from downstairs, and I ran down to see what was going on. Ninja had apparently assumed that I'd abandoned him, as he was sitting in the middle of the floor pouring out his agony. He stopped abruptly as soon as he saw me, with a rather embarrassed look on his face. He did this every so often, and he always looked sheepish. I picked him up for a big hug, and then settled him into one of his favorite cat beds.

On the coffee table beside Ninja's bed were my two new bears. I left Ian's one where it was so he could see it when he got home, but I picked up the box containing Kegan's gift. I couldn't find any store name on the box, so I didn't think I could return it.

What was I going to do with it? It looked like it had probably been expensive, and I couldn't bring myself to throw it out, but I also didn't think I could keep it. I thought about putting it away until Ian and I could decide what to do with it, but that didn't seem right either. If only I knew someone who wanted it...

An ad I'd seen on the subway ages ago flickered in the back of my mind, and I went upstairs to the computer. Sure enough, the zoo was holding a charity auction in just a few weeks and they were soliciting donations. I found a padded envelope and tucked the bear, still in its box, carefully inside. I filled the envelope with crumpled newspaper and then struggled to address it, lumpy as it was, to the zoo's charity coordinator.

I took the package downstairs and put it beside my purse to mail when I left to pick up Ian. Looking down at it, I felt a pang of sadness. It really was a beautiful

little bear. I couldn't keep it, though; it would remind me of Kegan every time I saw it, and I didn't need to be reminded.

Not of that, anyhow. I *did* need to remember that I'd made mistakes, and that I'd eventually done the right thing, that I had the strength to do what I wanted.

But the bear tattooed on my back could remind me of all that.

I turned my back on Kegan's bear and went upstairs to get my earrings, but was stopped dead by the sight of myself in the mirror on the closet door. My outfit, a swingy black skirt that Ian loved on me and a baby-blue t-shirt that would be perfect with my shawl, looked gorgeous. *I* looked gorgeous.

I really did. I don't think I'd ever thought that word in connection with myself before, much less said it, but this time I said it right out loud. "You look gorgeous." I said it, and I meant it.

By ten-thirty, I was completely ready. I didn't need to leave for the airport until noon. What could I do that wouldn't make a mess of the house or of me? I tried to watch television, but I'd forgotten just how banal most weekend shows were, and I quickly became frustrated. I tried reading, but none of my current novels seemed appealing. I needed a hobby, but they're difficult to acquire on the spur of the moment.

Finally, I decided to do nothing. Since I couldn't come up with anything to do, I figured I might as well make a conscious choice to do nothing.

I poured myself a glass of water, added a slice of lemon and a cucumber spear like the spa had done with their water, and headed for the balcony. I spent a few minutes checking out the plants, and discovered to my joy that my strawberry plant was bearing one strawberry. Completely unripe, but it would get there.

I settled down on one of my Ikea chairs, and stared out over the ravine. Birds flew in and out of the trees, accompanied by an incredible variety of songs. A squirrel came right up on the edge of the balcony, and we watched each other for a few minutes until some signal I didn't recognize made him skitter away. The trees swayed and danced in the breeze, and my petunias repeated their movements on a small scale. I sipped my water, watched the shifting patterns of the trees' leaves, and breathed deeply.

When it was time for me to leave, I felt like I'd had a week's vacation.

Standing at the arrivals gate at the airport, I played with the edge of my shawl and tried to hold on to the peace I'd felt, tried to protect it from the waves of fear and uncertainty that were washing over me.

Naturally, Ian's plane was delayed. If I'd been late, it would have been right on time. Only thirty minutes, but it felt like an eternity.

Finally, the announcement came that the plane had arrived, and that the passengers would be disembarking shortly. (That word always makes me think they'll come out of the plane barking and yipping, which would be quite entertaining, but sadly it never happens.)

People streamed out of the airport gate. The crowds caused a great deal of confusion as people tried to find their families and friends. Most people seemed happy, although I did see one sour-looking man meeting an even more sour-looking woman. They didn't kiss, didn't hug, barely even seemed to speak.

Would that be Ian and me?

As I waited, the stream of people became a trickle, and then just one or two stragglers came out, and then nobody.

Where was he?

I stood for a few minutes, staring at the gate as though I could somehow will it to release him. Either it was particularly resistant or my willing skills were sub-par, because Ian didn't appear.

I headed to the information desk at the baggage claim area, trying hard not to imagine any of the horrors that could have befallen him in Bangladesh. I'd never received an answer to my email on Friday, which I'd chalked up to his getting ready to leave. Now, though, it seemed more sinister.

I reached the information desk, and lined up behind two other frazzled-looking people. The first customer was dealt with (not to his satisfaction, judging by the look on his face), and the second moved up to take his place. A man came up beside me, and I moved forward slightly to establish my claim to being next in

line.

"Don't worry, sweetheart," he said, "I won't go in front of you."

I wasn't quite sure how to respond to this, so I said nothing.

The woman in front of me was finished and turned to leave, and the man moved right up and began to talk to the clerk. I was blazing. For a second, I was tongue-tied, and then inspiration struck.

"Excuse me, *sweetheart*," I said, matching his intonation, "but I was next in line."

The look on his face! It nearly made me laugh out loud, but I contained myself. With an angelic smile, I moved forward and the clerk, thankfully, turned her attention to me.

Conscious of the man fuming behind me, I quickly explained the situation. I soon understood why the other customers had left the line looking less than pleased.

"I cannot release the names of any passengers."

"I'm not asking you to. All I want to know is--"

"I cannot release the names of anyone who was on board."

I paused, unsure of how to proceed against what seemed to be some sort of robot. "I understand that. I simply want to know if--"

She began to repeat her line, but I kept talking over her. "--if my husband was on the flight. I already know his name, you just have to say 'yes' or 'no'."

"I cannot release the--"

"Oh, for the love of... Fine then."

I turned on my heel, trying to ignore the snickers of 'sweetheart', and my own sweet heart nearly stopped beating. Right at the end of the large room, I saw a familiar face.

Ian.

Heading outside.

I ran full-tilt across the arrival hall, dodging suitcases and slow-moving travelers like a football player running to make a touchdown. My elliptical training seemed to be paying off.

"Ian!"

He froze halfway through the door, and turned to face me as I ran up to him.

"Hi," I said, feeling completely off balance. I'd been set to meet him at the arrival gate like a civilized person; this head-long dash was not part of my plan.

"Hi," he said.

"Why were you so much later than everyone else?"

"My bags ended up on the wrong carousel."

"Oh."

We stared at each other for a moment. Neither of us moved. There'd been no hugs, no kisses, and barely any words. A huge luggage cart, hauling a tiny man behind it, broke the spell, and we moved to the side of the room.

He looked so different! Somehow I hadn't expected that; it had only been a month, after all. But he was deeply tanned, and his hair was cut in a different way, and he'd built up more muscle.

Gorgeous, actually.

But somehow a stranger.

"I like your shawl," he said, his voice sounding as awkward as I felt. "You did a beautiful job."

"Thanks. You gave me the yarn, so thanks."

"You're welcome," he said, and then we stood staring at each other again.

I tried to cover my discomfort by reaching for one of his suitcases to help him out to the car. He reached for the same suitcase at the same time, and our hands touched.

By the way he snapped his hand back, I knew he'd felt the same surge of electric connection that had ripped through me. I stared up at him, and he stared back. Neither of us moved. I couldn't think of what to say, what to do. Then, suddenly, I knew.

I stepped past the suitcases so there was nothing between us, put my arms around his neck, and kissed him full on the mouth.

He froze at first, and I felt an icy fear chill my heart. Then he came to life. His arms strong around my waist, his body warm and solid against me, our mouths reclaiming each other.

The kiss lasted only a few seconds, but I felt like spring had come in the middle of a Canadian winter, thawing all the frozen places and making everything new again.

I gazed deep into his eyes, feeling tears rising to my own, tears that to my amazement were matched in his. "I have missed you," he said, quietly and slowly, making every word count. "I love you."

My tears spilled over. "I love you too. I'm so sorry."

Ian shook his head. "I'm sorry too. I'm sorry for everything. It's all right. We're fine."

Then he lowered his lips to mine again, and I felt his desire, and his love, pouring over me. I'd been so afraid of other thoughts, other memories, intruding, but all I could think about was Ian. Ian, and our fresh start.

The kiss was magical.

When it ended, he pulled me against him and hugged me so hard I could hardly breathe. We clung together for a long moment, and then he whispered, "Let's go home."

"Okay," I whispered back.

"So," he said, picking up the largest of his suitcases and waiting while I picked up the smaller one, "that shawl really is gorgeous. I did good buying that yarn."

"You sure did," I said, as we set off together.

"And short hair suits you. It looks great."

"Thanks. Yours too," I said, looking over at him. Something dark on his arm caught my eye, and I reached over and pulled up his t-shirt sleeve to show a tattoo of dense black lines, bold and powerful, encircling his bicep, with a deep blue star embedded in the lines. I stopped walking and stared.

"A few of the guys went out to get them last weekend," he said, putting a slight stress on 'guys'. "I was going to tell you, but I thought it might be fun for you to find it. I'd have got a polar bear but I didn't know if they could really do one and I didn't want a messed up one. I figured you like stars too, so why not?"

Our eyes met and I shook my head in amazement. "It looks great on you, but I wouldn't have expected it. I never thought you were the tattoo type."

He grinned, the Ian I'd fallen in love with. "I'm my own type."

I considered flashing him my back, but decided against it. Plenty of time for that later. "You're *my* type," I said, and kissed him again, long and sweet and just as good as the other kisses.

As we parted, he murmured, "I want you," then pulled me in again and kissed me so hungrily my body caught fire in an instant. I couldn't speak, but I returned his kiss with more than enough enthusiasm to make my feelings clear.

He caught me by the shoulders and held me away from him. "Enough airport. Let's go home. I... miss Ninja."

"Do you now," I said, smiling at him. "Then let's get you home to see him right away." I had a feeling poor Ninja would have to wait a while to get his daddy's full attention, and I didn't mind a bit.

We walked on, a little faster, holding hands, and Ian said, "Hey, are you okay with that suitcase? It's heavy."

"I'm fine," I said, noticing with surprise that I really was fine.

Ian raised an eyebrow.

"I've been going to the gym," I said almost apologetically. "I haven't lost any weight, but I think I'm stronger."

"You look awesome, I can see muscles," Ian said, eyeing me dramatically.

Then he laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"Oh, nothing... just maybe now the two of us will be strong enough to finally get the junk off the balcony."

"Maybe," I agreed, stopping to kiss my wonderful husband yet again.